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彼女なト

さくら荘の

6

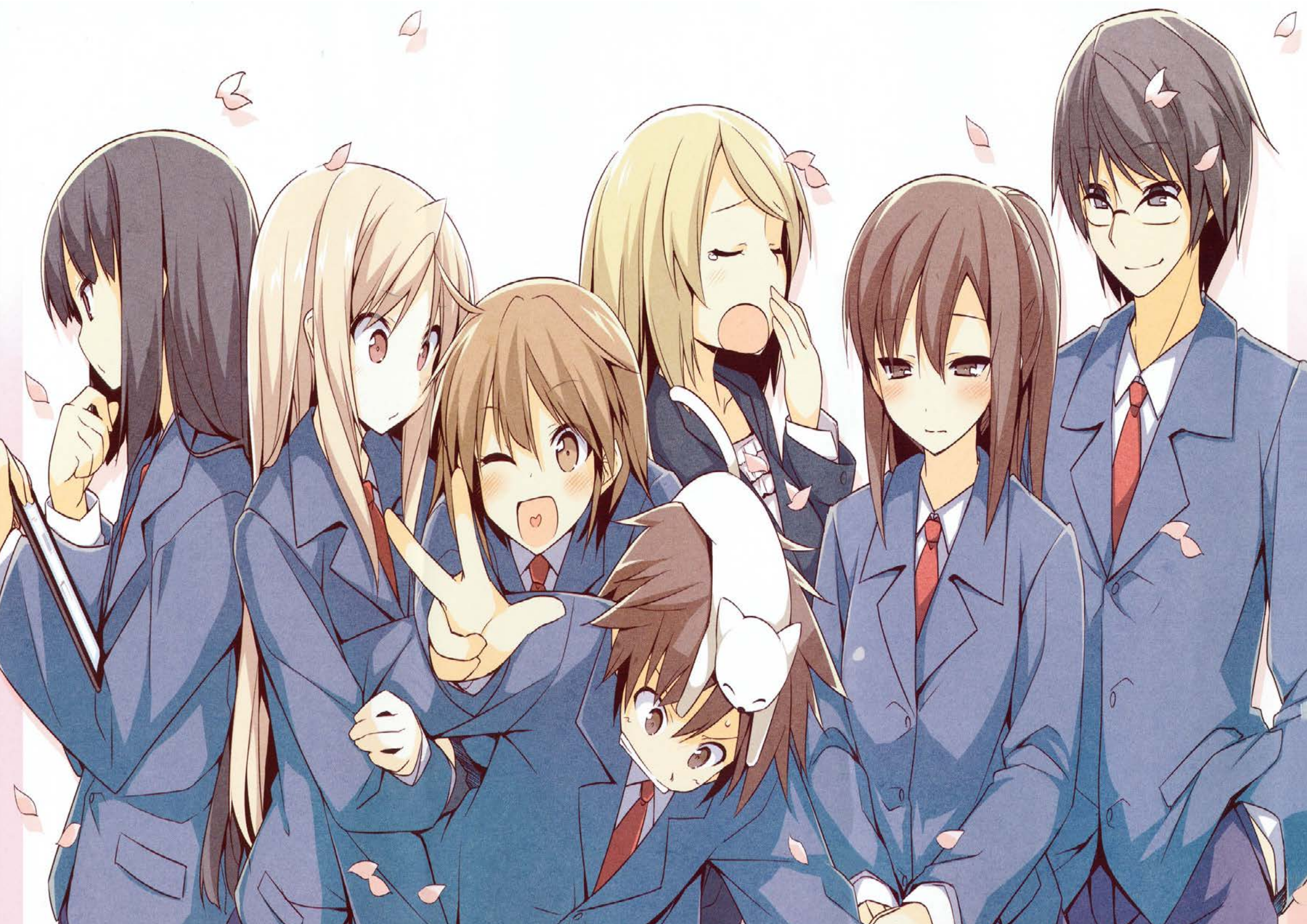
C O N T E N T S


第一章	この先もただいまを言うために	11
第二章	きらめく日々を駆け抜けろ!	99
第三章	誰のせいでもなく雨は降る	175
第四章	卒業式	231
第五章	旅立ちの日に	329

デザイン ● T

龍之介様の
第二ボタンは
予約済み
ですからね。







Sakurasou
no
pet na kanojo

Misaki
Kamiigusa

Sakurasou no Pet na Kanojo Volume 6

Prologue

For all the new encounters in Sakurasou, thank you.

Chapter 1 – So we can keep calling it home

Part 1

Although Sakurasou was pretty much in a state of disorder and chaos just about all the time, he had never thought the situation would get this bad. Not even that, he had never even entertained the possibility that Sakurasou would disappear one day...

Thus, Sorata felt extremely affected by this. His eyes widened due to surprise, and he began questioning himself on whether he had misheard Chihiro's statement.

If what Chihiro said was true, what would happen to his high school life from now? To Sorata, who was still in his second year of school, he still had one whole year ahead of him.

The image he had in his head of welcoming his third year in Suiko slowly began crumbling before him. Without a place to stay, somewhere that he could call home, he came to realize that the future he had envisioned could no longer be a possibility.

However, even when faced with this shocking development, excluding Sorata and Nanami who had voiced their surprise earlier, the other four were unexpectedly calm. This was to be expected from the residents of Sakurasou, in a certain sense.

Misaki was having a staring contest with one of Sorata's cats who had jumped onto the dining table, while Jin was readjusting his glasses, patiently waiting for what Chihiro may say next. As for the other two...Mashiro and Ryuunosuke, they were completely oblivious to what was going on. Mashiro even took a mooncake from the snacks that were placed in the center of the dining table and began nibbling on it, all the while mumbling "It's good." Ryuunosuke was, as usual, typing away on his laptop's keyboard as if nothing had happened.

Their reactions made him wonder whether he had misheard Chihiro after all. No, he told himself, he had heard it, and Nanami's reaction was proof of that.

"What's going on, Sensei?"

Sorata turned towards Chihiro for an explanation, as he knew she was the only person he could get any answers from.

His gaze was focused on - Chihiro's lips, which slowly drew apart.

However, what came out was another person's voice.

Misaki stood up energetically and shot a victory sign at him. The cat from earlier got startled and ran off.

"Huh?"

Sorata expressed his surprise at the situation which was only getting stranger and strange. Was there really something about this whole situation that deserved such a jubilant reaction?

"Why is that so?"

There was a possibility that Misaki's way of thinking might be even more incomprehensible than the reason behind Sakurasou's impending demolition.

“Kouhai-kun, weren’t you listening to Chihiro! ‘Always pay attention to your teachers’, didn’t they teach you that in primary school?”

Mashiro returned the untouched half of the mooncake she had taken a bite out of earlier to its original packaging and sat down quietly. Since her facial expressions didn’t change at all throughout the entire incident, there was no way of telling whether she actually understood the situation.

Conversely, Nanami clenched her fists that had been placed on the table earlier and appeared to be trying to resist something.

Sorata looked again at Chihiro, feeling even more confused.

Chihiro merely sighed slowly, as though she had given up.

“It’s been decided that Sakurasou will be demolished by this year.”

She repeated those words yet again.

It was as if Sorata had just sensed the gravity of the situation. The fact that Sakurasou would eventually be gone...

As he finally came to terms with this truth, Sorata reacted impulsively, allowing himself to be controlled by his emotions. He felt as if he was slowly burning up, and at the same time he felt an energy well up inside him, as though he would blow up at any time. A jolt of electricity seemed to course through him, and he asked, almost to himself, in a soft and low voice:

“Why?”

“Judging from the poor condition this building is in, it has been deemed that it would be too dangerous to allow students to live in here.”

Chihiro continued calmly.

“Even so, why is this happening so suddenly!”

Sorata leaned forward in the direction of the dining table, almost standing up as he did so.

“Who approved this!?”

“A professional.”

Chihiro replied coldly.

“When?”

Sorata continued, without waiting for a reply:

“I didn’t see any professionals arriving recently.”

At the same time, he directed his gaze towards Nanami and Misaki.

“I didn’t see one either.”

“Neither did I~”

Even Mashiro claimed she never saw one.

“Of course you all didn’t get to see them. I let them come over to check up on the condition of this place during the winter break.”

“The winter break...don’t tell me...”

Chihiro had ordered all residents of Sakurasou to return to their respective hometowns during the previous winter break. Sorata recalled that Chihiro claimed she would be overseas on holiday during that period, thus they couldn’t stay behind as there would be no supervising

teacher to watch over them, but was her true motive to get them out so the building could be inspected?

Furthermore, Chihiro didn't seem to have left for Australia at all, so she would have been in Japan during the break...

"You lied to us!"

Sorata cried out.

Mashiro shot a glance at him from the side, probably because she was startled, but he had no time to be paying attention to her worries.

"That would seem to be the case."

Chihiro said nonchalantly.

"Sensei!"

"Calm down a little, Sorata."

Jin, who had been sitting and thinking silently since earlier, butted in.

"Something seems strange about all this."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not gonna dispute that Sakurasou is in a bad condition, but it's not terrible up to the point where we must be evacuated immediately. We should understand this the most, since we're the ones living in it."

"Um..."

Like what Jin had said, the place was indeed rundown, but something still didn't seem quite right.

“Sakurasou is still livable in.”

Mashiro butted in quietly. She seemed to be listening, at least for now.

“Even if this place really is going to be torn down, why can’t they just wait until Sorata’s batch graduates? The members of the board are all adults, so I’m sure they can patiently wait for another year. After all’s said and done, they can do whatever they want with the place after it’s empty, wouldn’t that reduce any potential hassle?”

Jin directed his gaze towards Chihiro meaningfully.

“Also, Chihiro herself should know that if they made the decision to demolish this place without consulting us, they’d definitely incur our protests.”

“...”

Chihiro remained silent, and she stared at the center of the dining table, apparently avoiding Jin’s gaze.

“Now, doesn’t all this just make one wonder whether there’s something else, something more urgent, that has caused this decision to be made?”

In that instant, Chihiro appeared to have glanced over at Mashiro. No, his eyes must have been playing tricks on him. Even if she had, Sorata couldn’t think of a reason behind her doing so.

“The reason why things seem rushed is because the decision was just made today. There’s nothing else to it.”

Chihiro replied frankly. Her crisp, direct demeanor seemed to deter the others from asking any other questions. Her gaze also hinted that she didn’t wish for any more questions to be asked.

“Really now?”

Jin asked yet another question in a cheery, upbeat voice, as if he wanted to aggravate her.

“Don’t ask meaningless questions, everything has already been approved and decided by the board.”

However, Chihiro was a tough nut to crack as well. From what he was hearing, Sorata felt that Jin’s questions were perfectly reasonable. There was a very high possibility that Chihiro was hiding something. Despite this, neither her expression nor her voice gave any hints that she may be doing so.

“Don’t worry. Kanda, Aoyama, Akasaka and Mashiro, we’ve already got approval for the four of you to be shifted back into the normal dormitories.”

Her tone was flat. All business.

“No one cares about that now!”

Sorata banged the table with his hands and stood up, briefly allowing his emotions to take hold of him.

He directed his slowly increasing anger and frustration towards Chihiro.

“...”

Chihiro’s silence created a small opening for her to speak.

“I’ve also gotten permission for you to continue rearing your cats there.”

“I just told you, that’s not what I’m concerned about!”

“That’s all I have to see. I’m sorry for taking up your time, this meeting is hereby adjourned.”

Chihiro ended the conversation prematurely and rose to leave the room.

“Sensei!”

Chihiro ignored Sorata’s cries and left the dining room for the solace of her own room, shutting the door behind her as she did so.

Only the six students remained.

“...”

No one spoke as everyone was thinking about the situation at hand, and this silence continued for a brief while.

“Well, things have become troublesome.”

Jin piped up, directing his statement to no one in particular.

“I’ll go convince the principal.”

Misaki suddenly shot up and prepared to dash out of the room, but Jin swiftly grabbed onto her shoulder and dragged her back to her seat.

“Don’t do this, Misaki.”

“Why!”

“If you do that, all you’ll do is incur the wrath of the principal. Under these circumstances, worsening our current situation wouldn’t exactly be a very smart move. Before we get all the details straightened out, please be a good girl, alright?”

“Huh~?”

Misaki seemed unhappy, but at least she seemed to have given up on her plan to dash out and find the principal. She pursed her lips and wrapped her arms around her knees, and began rocking back and forth on her chair. Suddenly, she smiled yet again, this time even more brilliantly than before.

“Now then, let’s have another meeting! The first line of defense for Sakurasou is about to be unveiled!”

“Before that, let me confirm something.”

“What is it?”

Since Sorata and Jin’s gazes had already met, Sorata replied in place of everyone else.

“Leaving Misaki and I, who are going to graduate soon, aside, are the rest of you alright with this? Don’t forget that this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance for you to return to the normal dormitories.”

“Of course, but...”

Just as he was about to voice his disdain, Jin butted in.

“The normal dormitories are not only designed very well, but also you guys won’t need to worry about the wind seeping in through the cracks in the windows, the doors won’t collapse like they do here, and your meals will even be taken care of by the cafeteria ladies. Compared to Sakurasou, it’s a vast improvement. Of course, there will also be even more time for all of you to work on your respective interests. For example, Sorata, without all these errands to get in your way, you can practice making proposals or programming and coding in your spare time.”

His points were indeed valid. Also, not that he really minded anyway, but if they were to move to the normal dormitories, the other students would probably talk behind their backs much less.

“Don’t decide impulsively, wouldn’t it be better for you if you were to take all these matters into consideration before making your decision?”

“I...”

Sorata wanted to express his opinion, but he stopped himself halfway in order to calm himself down. Jin had just told him not to let his emotions get the better of him.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

After slowly rearranging his thoughts and simmering his anger for a brief while, he attempted to remain calm and slowly opened his eyes again.

“Even so, I want to continue staying in Sakurasou.”

“Why is that so?”

Jin asked in a probing manner.

“It’s true, Sakurasou is a very rundown place, it’s cold in the winter and hot in the summer. The floors of the hallways creak unpleasantly whenever you step on them, and sometimes the planks come off altogether. My room door collapses just as easily, and the locks don’t work at all, leaving us with no privacy to speak off.”

“Also, when it rains, the ceiling of the second floor leaks...”

Nanami added.

They could go on forever listing all the inconveniences they faced while living there. Once in the winter, there was no hot water; once in the summer, some bees built a hive on the balcony, causing massive chaos. Weeds would sprout at an alarmingly fast rate if the garden were to be left unattended even briefly. In Sakurasou, there were all sorts of problems that the students in the normal dormitories did not have to face.

Sorata had initially found all these issues annoying as well, and he had wanted to return to the normal dormitories. Back then, he even had a slip of paper with the words “Goal! Escape from Sakurasou!” written on it which he pasted on one of the walls in his room.

However, now everything was different. Now, even when doing seemingly mundane things such as going to the nearby bathhouse with everyone else, he found them interesting and enjoyable. Although he didn’t want to have to face a similar issue again, he always found himself smiling whenever he thought of the beehive incident. Neither could he forget the sweet smell of BBQ after they had cleared out all the weeds in the front yard. He wanted to experience it all again.

He didn’t know whether it was because he had finally realized that Misaki and Jin were going to graduate. Sorata began to feel that his daily life, which he had initially thought normal and bland was becoming increasingly precious to him.

“When I finally realized...I felt that all the annoying things we’ve faced together had all turned into memories. The more troublesome, the more painstaking the situation, the more clearly I remember it.”

“Mm, that’s right. Ever since I came to Sakurasou, I’ve been going through diaries at a surprisingly fast rate.”

Nanami agreed gently.

"If Sakurasou were to disappear one day, it would feel as if everything important had disappeared as well...and I don't want that to happen."

"I see. I understand how the two of you feel. What about you, Mashiro?"

Mashiro...appeared to be staring into space.

"Oi, Shiina."

"Hmm?"

"Do you understand what's going on?"

"I do."

"Really now..."

It was hard to believe.

"If a multiple choice question comes up about this, I'll definitely be able to get it right."

"That basically means you barely understand half of it!"

"Don't treat me like an idiot."

"I was only doing that because you mentioned the part about the multiple choice question!"

Mashiro looked at him unhappily, as if she wanted him to pose her the question.

"Is four choices alright with you?"

"Two."

"You're just going to guess! Forget it!"

"Sakurasou's going to disappear."

It seemed that she had a basic grasp of the situation.

"Yes. Do you know what this means for you?"

"I'll be living with the rest of you in the normal dormitories starting April."

"...Hmm, you seem to understand after all?"

However, Mashiro appeared to be a little too calm.

"Say, Mashiro, males and females will be separated in the normal dormitories, so Kanda-san won't be able to wake you up every morning and get your clothes and make meals for you any more."

"Is that so?"

Mashiro turned her gaze directly towards Sorata.

"That would seem to be the case. Males are prevented from entering the female dormitories and vice versa. The buildings are separate as well, so if you go back to the normal dormitories, you guys won't be able to stay together like you are now. It's essentially a parting of ways."

But if so, who would take care of Mashiro? He'd feel bad if Nanami had to take up the responsibility.

"Parting ways..."

Mashiro sank deep into thought, which was a rare sight.

"If Sorata's not around, I'll feel very troubled."

Something about her conclusion seemed a little off.

“Sakurasou is better.”

Leaving that aside for now, it would seem that Mashiro had also understood that they didn’t want Sakurasou to disappear, and so they left it at that.

“Which means that Mashiro agrees as well. Now only Ryuunosuke is left.”

The person in question was typing away frantically on his laptop, and he didn’t appear to have been listening.

“Right, so now we’re going to begin the second line of defense for Sakurasou!”

When did the first one end?

“Whatever, forget Ryuunosuke for now. Right then, Sorata, I’ll leave you to handle this meeting.”

Jin nonchalantly pushed the responsibility over to Sorata, who of course felt that they couldn’t just ignore Ryuunosuke.

“Why me?”

“Well, because you’re the only one standing, and you seem energetic too.”

“That’s not why I’m standing up!”

The real reason was because he had simply forgotten to sit down again after attempting to stop Chihiro from leaving earlier.

“Forget it, it’s not really that much of a deal anyway...ahem, so, let’s get this brainstorming session to save Sakurasou on the road already. If any of you have any objections, please raise your hands.”

“Since it’s already been decided by the Board, this is going to be a real pain.”

Jin blurted out, not even bothering to raise his hand.

“Yeah.”

He was right. If they were going against the entire Board, then just convincing the principal alone wouldn’t do much to help their current situation. To make matters worse, Sorata didn’t even know who the members of the Board were.

“Also, regarding what Mitaka-senpai said earlier, something about that conversation just now did seem really suspicious. I, too, feel that this whole thing seems overly rushed...if there is another real reason behind it, I’d definitely like to know it.”

Nanami was the next to voice her opinion.

Her points seemed valid at surface value, but more importantly, if there was an ulterior motive behind this entire affair, it would be easier for Sorata and the others to handle the situation. If the poor living conditions of Sakurasou itself had apparently already been decided to be a threat, their reassurances wouldn’t do much good in requesting the school to call off their advances, as the decision would be seen as a considerate act by the school in order to safeguard their wellbeing.

“But, is that really so?”

Jin crossed his hands behind his head and looked up at the ceiling.

“Jin-senpai, what’s that supposed to mean?”

"I just feel that if there really is another reason which Chihiro intentionally did not tell us, there's a possibility that she thinks that it's better that we don't know about it. Just think about it, if it wasn't something she thought would be better kept secret, would there be a need for her to keep silent?"

"Um...if it's a legitimate reason, that might actually be the case. Either way, this situation still makes me feel really uncomfortable."

She wanted a more convincing reason.

"Hmm, I second that. Anyway, Ryuunosuke, what's your take on this?"

Sorata furrowed his brow and directed a question towards Ryuunosuke.

"If we were to look at the Board's meeting records, the real reason for this demolition should be written down somewhere there."

Jin casually uttered something completely unexpected.

"Y-You can't do that! Mitaka-senpai! That's a crime! Didn't you just tell Kamiigusa-senpai not to get herself into trouble?"

Nanami hurriedly stepped in.

"It's fine, since it's Ryuunosuke we're talking about here. I'm sure he won't leave behind any traces which the school can track us down with."

"That's not what you should be worrying about!"

"Interesting, Aoyama-san, it appears your stoic personality still hasn't changed in the slightest even after staying here for such a long period of time."

"I find that pretty normal, actually."

Meanwhile, Ryuunosuke remained perfectly silent, and his fingers deftly maneuvered his laptop computer's keyboard.

"Speaking of which, what was Akasaka-san doing all this time anyway?"

If Sorata's eyes weren't mistaken, he was currently looking at information regarding housing rentals.

"I was just thinking about where I should move to next."

"Why would you..."

"The normal dormitories allocate two students per room, too crowded. If you want me to drag all my equipment from my room like my central processing units, monitors and so on, I'm willing to bet that there's absolutely no way another student can fit in. That was the very reason why I came to Sakurasou in the first place."

"Then what's with searching for houses for rent!?"

"Kanda, weren't you listening to what Chihiro-sensei said earlier? Or were you just unable to understand her words? What a troublesome one."

Ryuunosuke looked at him condescendingly.

"Speak for yourself!"

"How rude."

"Also, what's with taking Sakurasou's destruction as a forgone conclusion! Are you saying that you'll be fine with this place being torn down!?"

“What a dumb question. There’s nothing good nor bad about it. Sakurasou’s going to be demolished by this year, and that’s all there is to it.”

“So, isn’t that exactly why we’re all sitting down to have this discussion?”

“It’s just a waste of time. I don’t think we’ll be able to find a plausible way to convince the Board to reverse its decision.”

“That’s...”

He was right, they had absolutely no idea what to do.

“...”

A foreboding silence overcame the dining room.

“There’s only one option...but it’s essentially impossible.”

Nanami spoke, carefully choosing her words. She pulled out her student’s handbook from one of the pockets in her vest, flipped to one of the pages at the far back and laid it out on the dining table so all of them could see what was written on it. She pointed to one of the rules listed there.

What was written there was...

“- With regards to decisions made by the school, as long as more than two-thirds of the student body is in objection to them, it has the right to propose an alternative.”

“T-That means...”

“If we can collect the signatures of at least two-thirds of the student body and make them into a sort of petition, we can request the Board to reconsider their decision and save Sakurasou.”

Jin answered in Nanami's place.

"That's great, Nanamin!"

Misaki lunged at Nanami with an immense hug, landing right smack onto her target. Nanami who was unable to fend off this surprise attack fell off her chair while yelling in surprise, and rolled onto the floor.

The others then began to hear noises coming from underneath the dining table.

"Wait a second, Kamiigusa-senpai! Why are you touching my breasts!?"

"Because that's where the mountains are!" (TL note: This may be a pun on Nanami's name as the Kanji for Aoyama reads 青山, where 山 (Yama) also means "Mountain".) (Editor Note: Alternatively, it could just be a normal roundabout way of using "mountain" to represent breasts.)

"If you want to talk about mountains, you'll be better off touching your own! No, wait, f-forget it, let go of me already!"

"Since you told me to forget it, I'll take that as consent to whatever I do next~"

"That's not what I meant! Ah, don't -"

"Oh, Nanamin, you pervert~"

"Hmm, to think that you'd actually remember something like this, Aoyama-san. Nothing less than what I'd expected from you."

Jin managed to continue the discussion with a straight face despite the faintly secret-garden-esque atmosphere that was beginning to spread around the room.

"I'm pretty sure we were all told to go through the student's handbook at least once when we first entered this place."

Nanami who had finally escaped from Misaki's clutches crawled out from under the table. She looked as if she had been caught up in a tornado, as she seemed completely exhausted.

"The only person who would follow an order like that would be you, Aoyama-san, wouldn't it? Ah, so would the former student council president..."

Jin began to mutter himself.

"Idiots."

That insult came from none other than Ryuunosuke, who was still looking for homes for rent.

"What about that was idiotic?"

Nanami readjusted her uniform and looked over at Ryuunosuke unhappily.

"I said 'I don't think we'll be able to find a plausible way'. Which part of Ponytail's idea was plausible in the slightest? Don't forget that there are over a thousand students studying here. That means we need about seven hundred signatures."

"It's possible."

Sorata replied, to which Nanami nodded vigorously in assent.

However, Ryuunosuke only seemed to have gotten more annoyed.

"Since you people don't seem to understand the situation even when given to you in hard numbers, I'll attempt to explain it using ratios."

Two-thirds of the school means about all of the first and second-year students.”

“I know that.”

“The third-year students can come and go from school as they please now, so the people I just mentioned earlier are now the only students here, you understand? Think about it.”

“...Even so, the chances of us succeeding aren’t zero.”

Since there were no other plausible methods, their only hope was to bank on this petition, no matter how unrealistic or difficult it may have seemed to them.

“What you said, Kanda, was merely baseless boasts of your determination. I’m not bored enough to begin dumping my precious time into such a stupid activity as this.”

“So, you’re just going to give up? Just like that?”

“Kanda, you need to calm down. Your time is way more precious than mine right now. Are your preparations for the proposal all complete?”

“ ... ”

Sorata was rendered momentarily speechless. Ryuunosuke had him beaten.

“...Of course, I have to deal with that as well.”

“If you end up failing because you wasted time on doing useless things like this, don’t come crying to me.”

“So what you’re saying is that since my upcoming proposal is extremely important, you want me to just accept that Sakurasou is going to be demolished and give up?”

“That’s what I was trying to say from the start. If you have the time and effort to protest against something that’s already been decided, you might as well spent that time and effort on something else instead, something that you can actually contribute to, something that you can produce actual results on.”

“What’s that supposed to mean!?”

“I made it so simple for you, and you still don’t understand. That’s a real surprise. Kanda, you underestimate that company’s panel of judges.”

“Of course not.”

“Even in the working world, that company’s especially infamous for asking particularly difficult questions during their interviews and the like. I heard they even have a nickname, the ‘DA company’.”

“I heard all about that from Kazuki-san already.”

“So you should know then? ‘D’ stands for Dead, and ‘A’ for Alive.”

The proposal review Sorata would be attending is essentially a meeting that would decide the survival of the project in question. If the project were to pass, it would definitely be produced and released, but conversely...Dead. Just as what Ryuunosuke had said. Game over.

The proposals that had actually passed through this round of hellish judging had apparently taken up less than ten percent of the whole batch.

“While you, Kanda, will be keeping yourself busy with this petition, the other candidates will undoubtedly be continuously preparing, spending

all their time and effort on the proposal in question. Faced with these opponents, Kanda, do you really think that you'll be able to get off easy by just using your spare time to work on the proposal? You're an unexpectedly cocky one."

"That's not it!"

He knew he had to put everything he had into his proposal, just as he had the last time...

"If you're really serious about this, shouldn't you have the willpower to be able to set everything else aside and go all out on this?"

Ryuunosuke's gaze appeared to have shifted towards Mashiro briefly.

Sorata knew exactly what that shift meant, he was trying to tell him that he had a prime example of someone who was able to do that right in front of him. Mashiro, who had dedicated her life to drawing up until now, had not changed in the slightest despite her shift to drawing manga instead. Going all out in this case meant putting all his effort into what mattered the most in this situation.

His future and Sakurasou's future - placing those two things on a balance and weighing the two wouldn't be an easy task. Both were equally important, of utmost importance.

"That's all I have to say."

"..."

Ryuunosuke left behind the still-speechless Sorata and slowly got up from his seat, shutting down his laptop and returning to his room after he did so.

Neither Mashiro, Nanami, Misaki nor Jin said anything throughout their entire exchange.

"I UNDERSTAND THAT PERFECTLY!"

Sorata pounded his fists on the dining table, but the pain only came to him a while later.

"I say, Sorata."

"What is it?"

Sorata looked up only to see Jin looking at him earnestly.

"Stay out of this."

Sorata's heart skipped a beat with shock at Jin's unexpected words. The shock of denial spread throughout his body, like ropes restraining him tight.

He shook off this oppressive sensation and replied forcefully in the next instant:

"No, I'll help out!"

"Are you sure? With regards to your current situation, I think following Ryuunosuke's advice would be best."

"I'll be sure to put in enough effort for the both of us, so you be sure to work hard and do well for your proposal!"

"No. I'll help. I'll go. With you all."

Sorata said clearly, accenting each and every syllable, as if he wanted to drill his thoughts into the skulls of all the others present.

"Because I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I were to just let things slide like this."

“Is that because Sakurasou’s going to be destroyed?”

Nanami asked.

“That’s half of the reason.”

“And the other half is?”

“What Ryuunosuke said was probably right. Even so, I don’t agree with his way of thinking nor doing things, so I’ll settle all this in my own way.”

“If so, you have to make sure your proposal passes the judging no matter what.”

“Roger that.”

“No matter what! We have to stop Sakurasou from being destroyed, Kouhai-kun!”

Sorata nodded vigorously in Misaki’s direction.

“Right, so it’s decided, then.”

“Mm, we’ll be beginning our defensive operations to protect Sakurasou starting tomorrow morning! Kouhai-kun! Be sure to wake up early!”

“I beg of you, please don’t wake me up at three in the morning again.”

“If so, I’ll wake you up at two thirty then!”

“Hell no! That’s still in the middle of the night for heaven’s sake!”

Part 2

The next day, Sorata, who was woken up by Misaki at five in the morning, passed through the school gates of Suiko an hour later - or to be precise, six A.M.

Sorata, Nanami, Mashiro, Jin and Misaki all slipped into their individual indoor slippers and headed towards the principal's office.

They had to get permission from the principal in order to carry out their petitioning activities, but the problem was that the principal himself insisted on being the earliest to reach school every single day.

Although the last time Sorata had been into the principal's office was when he was first exiled off to Sakurasou, he for some reason felt that the office was smaller than he had remembered.

As they announced their arrival, the principal looked up at them somewhat reluctantly.

"You all want to carry out petitioning activities?"

"Can we get your permission for this?"

"..."

The principal furrowed his brow, presumably because he didn't wish to approve their request. He seemed rather shocked as well, also presumably because he didn't expect Sorata and the others to follow legitimate school protocols for once.

"But, the matter has already been gone over and approved by the Board."

The principal turned them down politely in a solemn tone.

Jin proceeded to rebutt his words nonchalantly:

“Well, it says on the school rules that as long as proper authorization is acquired, anyone can carry out petitioning activities, so there shouldn’t really be a problem, right?”

Nothing less than to be expected of him.

The principal shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and his gaze seemed to be directing a message to them: “You people have broken the school rules so many times, and now you’re intending to use them as your salvation?”

He pondered the situation briefly, and at long last decided to grant them his seal of approval. Although the principal had many things to say to them, he reached the conclusion that it was impossible for them to collect the signatures of two-thirds of the student body in such a short time, and also matters would be less troublesome if they were dealt with in this fashion as compared to turning their request down outright.

“I can’t give you my support in any way, but I guess I wish you all the best of luck.”

By the time Sorata and the others prepared to leave, the principal had regained his composure enough to be able to speak normally.

As they left the principal’s office, they immediately began their petitioning activities just as school hours began.

They stood at the school gates and began to shout:

“Please support our petition against the demolition of Sakurasou.”

Their activities continued for another half an hour, and they stopped just before their first period of school began. Although it was almost March, the weather outside was still rather cold, and they could still see steam billowing out of their mouths as they breathed.

Due to the fact that they had spent the entire time doing nothing but standing around at the same spot, they felt as if their very bones were being pierced through by the cold, their hands were just about frozen, and they had lost almost all sense of hearing.

“Say, Sorata.”

“What is it?”

“Are my ears still there?”

“I know very well how you feel, but please don’t ask creepy questions like that!”

Their very first day at the job, along with being extremely arduous, proved to be a complete failure.

They had only gotten three signatures. One of them came from a friend of Misaki’s - Himemiya Saori, a third-year student; while the remaining two belonged to two of Nanami’s close friends - Takasaki Mayu and Honjou Yayoi.

Essentially, friendship votes.

Sorata felt as if they were beginning to witness how cruel reality could be.

The bigger problem was, pretty much all of the students didn’t know about the predicament Sakurasou was currently in. Thus, they received about little to no recognition from the student body. Even when they tried to explain the situation, they couldn’t properly convey the sense of urgency of the situation. To the other students, whatever may happen to Sakurasou would be none of their business - and Sorata and the others knew that very well.

The fact that Sakurasou was seen as a so-called special dormitory for problem students wasn't helping either, as this resulted in many students intentionally not wishing to get involved with the petition. Instead they watched from afar, silently whispering to each other while watching them go about their activities.

"The biggest problem we have to overcome is the lack of interest, and the second is the students' misconceptions of us."

Jin calmly analyzed their findings from that morning and came to a conclusion.

"It seems we'll need to refine our tactics somewhat."

They were in such a disadvantageous position that it didn't even seem as if they were starting from zero. Instead it was as if they were starting from a negative number.

As a result, Sorata was left rather dispirited, and he drifted through all his morning lessons in a depressed state.

Just as the recess bell rang, he heard a voice coming from the seat diagonally behind him.

"So, did you get any signatures?"

Its owner was Ryuunosuke. He appeared to be eating nothing but a gigantic tomato for lunch, and he ate it voraciously, taking big bites as he went. No signs of stationery nor textbooks of any sort were present on his desk, instead there was a laptop computer placed there, and numerous colored wires that stretched all the way to the classroom walls were connected to it.

"We got three of them."

Sorata replied coldly, not even bothering to look behind him. This shift in attitude was a result of their argument just a day earlier.

“That’s some rather impressive results you’ve got there.”

“I’d like to see if you could do better.”

Sorata turned around in anger, and in response Ryuunosuke pulled out a tablet computer from his bag and passed it to him.

“What’s this?”

“Shut up and look.”

Sorata looked down at its screen just as he had been instructed to, only to see what appeared to be some sort of word document. He looked at its title in confusion, and what was written there was -

- 「Suimei High School of the Arts·Executive Board of Staff Meeting Record」

“This is!”

Sorata looked up only to see Ryuunosuke typing away at his laptop again, his attention no longer on Sorata.

“As you can see, it’s the Board’s meeting records.”

“How did you...”

No, he didn’t even need to ask. Ryuunosuke had definitely hacked into the school’s servers.

“You said it was a waste of time yesterday, but you went ahead and did it anyway.”

Nanami who had been listening at the side butted in.

“Don’t get me wrong. I was just using that as an exercise to test Maid’s capabilities.”

“Thanks, Akasaka!”

“I just said it was just an exercise...”

Ryuunosuke’s gaze met Sorata’s, and he promptly darted his gaze back towards his laptop screen, evidently rather uncomfortable about the situation.

“But, is this really alright?”

“Of course it is. I was hidden behind numerous foreign proxies. Even if they discover traces of my unlawful entry, they’ll never be able to track me down.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what?”

“Forget it, you won’t get it even if I tell you.”

Nanami was probably going to say something like “As a person with morals, is this really the right thing to do?” However, to someone like Ryuunosuke who prioritizes the end result over the means, any form of reprimanding would be useless.

“If so, don’t mention it in the first place, Ponytail. You made me waste thirty seconds of my precious time.”

“But you were the one who started it, if you look at it that way...”

An argument was evidently about to break out, but Sorata felt no inclination to stop them.

He began to read the meeting records, shutting out the commotion coming from around him.

The first thing he laid eyes on was the reports related to the safety inspections of Sakurasou.

- In compliance with safety regulations, it is recommended that Sakurasou be evacuated and demolished within the next five years.

“That...that means we don’t need to move away right now, then.”

According to the data before his eyes, they still had five more years.

“If so, then why demolish the place...”

Sorata asked to no one in particular, then continued reading the report which would definitely contain the answers to all his queries.

“It can’t be...”

The real reason behind the demolition of Sakurasou was written just below the inspection data.

“Kanda-san?”

Sorata read through the whole thing in detail and passed the tablet computer to Nanami. Although she appeared rather confused, she took it from him and began navigating the document with clumsy movements. As she read through the document, her gaze grew piercingly sharp.

“Just as we had suspected, the stuff about the poor safety conditions of Sakurasou was just an excuse.”

Yes, there was another real reason behind its destruction.

A certain someone's name had appeared many times throughout the entire document.

It was a name they knew very well.

- Shiina Mashiro.

"Now you all know the truth."

Ryuunosuke said calmly.

"Shiina's artistic talents can be considered as a sort of cultural treasure. So, the Board felt threatened by her 'wasting' her talents on drawing boring mediums of entertainment such as manga. Luckily, most of Japan has not yet heard of this genius teenage artist 「Shiina Mashiro」, so the situation does not yet pose that large of a threat. But, if the news of her drawing manga were to spread worldwide, there would be a high possibility of the media manipulating the news to seem as if Suimei High School of the Arts had destroyed any hopes of her improving her artistic talents. Of course, if that were to happen, the school would be dealt a massive blow; and the responsibility would obviously be pushed to the board. Thus, the decision was made to destroy Sakurasou instead, which was evidently seen as a bad influence on her. Everything had to be settled before the news leaks out to the public...or at least, that seems to be the case."

Ryuunosuke looked genuinely fed up, and he sighed loudly.

"Using the poor safety conditions of the building was definitely a cover-up so they could handle the matter more discreetly. If they were to move Shiina out directly, others would definitely notice, so they chose this method instead to protect the reputation of the school. What an idiotic

bunch. Before doing all these useless things, they should at least improve the school's firewall systems first. Completely hopeless."

"Wait a second! Shiina's career as a manga artist has nothing to do with Sakurasou!"

The reason why Mashiro had came from England in the first place was to become a manga artist. It was a huge misunderstanding.

"Even if what you say is true, at this point, it won't matter. What matters is what the Board thinks."

"I'll go explain everything to the principal!"

Just as Sorata was about to stand up and leave, Ryuunosuke stopped him.

"Don't do that."

"Why not!"

"If I were the principal, and you were to suddenly storm into my office furiously, I would ask: 'And where did you get this information from?'"

"..."

"I'm sure you aren't planning to say something like 'I hacked into the school servers and looked at the Board's meeting records', are you?"

"If you said those things, the situation would probably just get worse."

Nanami worriedly attempted to comfort Sorata.

"...I know that."

Sorata clenched his teeth in an attempt to control his emotions.

Just yesterday, Jin had stopped Misaki as she prepared to dash off to confront the principal. He said that they shouldn't be attracting more problems...and they also discussed how they would be taking a more direct strategy this time - namely through petitioning.

"Also, even if you don't say anything, I'm sure Chihiro-sensei had already attempted to explain that Shiina becoming a manga artist has absolutely nothing to do with Sakurasou's influence."

Ryuunosuke remained calm as always.

"I know it's unpleasant, but I agree with Akasaka-san. After reading the meeting records, the reason why they're choosing to tear down the place only now is probably because Sensei put in a few words for us. If you noticed, they've been mentioning Sakurasou in their reports since November of last year."

That date happened to coincide with Mashiro's debut on a serialized shoujo manga magazine. It probably wasn't a coincidence.

Now that they knew pretty much everything about the situation, they too understood why Chihiro had intentionally remained silent. It was because Mashiro was the cause of everything.

"But, isn't this a little strange!?"

"There are many strange things in this world. That's because there's an overflowing abundance of people who all believe that their opinions are absolutely correct, and these people coincidentally all happen to be in some sort of powerful position."

"How are you remaining this calm!"

"One cannot hope to make the correct decision in any situation without first remaining calm. Also, shouldn't you at least feel happy?"

“What’s there to be happy about!”

“We now know the real reason behind all this. If we work backwards, we now know how to save Sakurasou as well.”

“...”

Sorata knew even without Ryuunosuke to tell him. There was actually a way to ensure Sakurasou’s survival. That solution had appeared in his head immediately after he had discovered the reason behind all this, within his troubled mind. Since Mashiro was the cause of all this...

“Since the both of you have suddenly gone quiet, I’ll assume that you’ve realized what I’m talking about.”

“We couldn’t possibly do something like that!”

Nanami retorted, letting her emotions get the better of her. However, Ryuunosuke’s expression remained unchanged, and he merely uttered the thought that was on all of their minds.

“We don’t need to collect any signatures, we just need Shiina to leave Sakurasou.”

“Shut up!”

Sorata’s anger instantly began to boil.

“Those people over at the Board are hoping that Shiina’s talents can be properly developed, according to their admittedly twisted logic, and so Sakurasou has to go. It’s a pretty good chance to do so, I must admit.”

“I told you to shut up!”

Without thinking, Sorata lashed out his arm and grabbed onto Ryuunosuke's collar.

"Hold on a second, Kanda-san."

They had caused a commotion, attracting the attention of their classmates. Their gazes pierced painfully into him.

"If you feel uncomfortable breaking the news to Shiina, I'll do it myself."

"No, you will NOT!"

"I don't understand you. The solution is right before your eyes, so why aren't you using it? I recall that I told you yesterday as well that you have other things that you should be focusing on. Once this problem is solved, you're free to work on that proposal of yours all you want."

"Akasaka, how could you even think of doing something like that?"

"This is but the only right decision to make."

"But then, wouldn't it all be meaningless!?"

"Of course it won't. Sakurasou will survive, and Kanda will have one problem off of his hands. Isn't that enough for you people? What else could you possibly want?"

"..."

Ryuunosuke looked down at Sorata sympathetically.

"I don't want anyone to disappear. Not Shiina, not Aoyama, not Misaki-senpai, not Jin-senpai, not Chihiro-sensei...and of course not you too, Akasaka, I hope you all can continue to stay in Sakurasou. Because you all are my friends, the ones most important to me."

Ryuunosuke seemed surprised for a brief moment. It might have been just Sorata's imagination.

"Well then, let me ask you..."

Ryuunosuke hesitated.

"What now?"

"Kanda, the most important people you speak of...are your relationships with them so fragile that they would dissipate so quickly just by a building been torn down?"

"Of course not."

"Those surface-level relationships would probably disappear quickly enough anyway, no matter how you look at it."

"I just said of course they're not like that."

"If so, then no matter whether Sakurasou disappears, or if someone were to leave Sakurasou, it shouldn't pose that much of an inconvenience to you. Anyone moving away anywhere wouldn't be a problem at all."

"..."

"Also, if you look at it logically, I don't think that hiding the information from the person in question would make you a true 'friend' of theirs, by what you said earlier."

Sorata remained speechless, having no way to counter Ryuunosuke's argument. When it came to reasoning, no one could beat Ryuunosuke. Sorata knew that very well, but when he realized what was going on, the conversation was already going in the way Ryuunosuke wanted it to.

The hand that was still grasping onto his collar sagged and slowly let go.

“Don’t forget that even if you were to save Sakurasou, half of the residents will be gone by next year.”

“That’s because Misaki-senpai and Jin-senpai are graduating, it can’t be helped...”

But, who was the other person? Ryuunosuke wouldn’t brush off two-thirds as a half.

“Akasaka-san, don’t tell me you’re planning to move out as well?”

“Sigh.”

Ryuunosuke sighed disappointedly at Nanami’s question.

“It seems we have another idiot over here.”

“What! What did you say!?”

“The other one who’s going to leave is you. Ponytail.”

“Huh?”

“What!?”

Sorata and Nanami exclaimed at the same time.

“If you pass the auditions, the voice acting agency should officially recruit you.”

“Yeah.”

“Thus, your next semester will be different from this semester in that you’ll be less financially burdened as you won’t have to pay for your

voice training lessons any longer. Although you'll definitely be facing difficulties when first starting out as a voice actor, just doing part-time jobs alone should be enough for you to support yourself."

"..."

"So the school would have no reason to let you continue your residence in Sakurasou. Which means that you'll be returning to the normal dormitories."

"..."

Nanami bit her lower lip as if attempting to control herself, evidence that she had understood what Ryuunosuke's words meant.

Conversely...although Sorata didn't wish to entertain the possibility, if Nanami were to fail her auditions, she wouldn't be continuing her stay in Sakurasou either.

That was because Nanami had made a promise with her father that she would return to Osaka if she were to fail her auditions. Obviously, if that were to happen, she wouldn't be able to continue staying in Sakurasou.

If Nanami were to fail her auditions but chose to continue her studies in Suiko, there was still a possibility that she might continue staying in Sakurasou. But Sorata didn't want to envision such a future for her. He wanted Nanami to pass her auditions, so he wasn't willing to even consider this situation. Still, it was true that Nanami would have no reason to continue staying in Sakurasou if she were to pass.

"Don't get me wrong, Ponytail. Sakurasou isn't a place where you can just stay in at your own whim. In case you've forgotten, it's supposed to be a den for problem students. If there's no problem with you, then you have no place there."

“ ... ”

“If you really haven’t considered this, then I suggest you consider it now and think seriously about what you’re going to do in the future. All groups of friends eventually scatter and collapse, as they always do. If so, moving into the normal dormitories along with everyone else might be the best decision after all. Or am I wrong?”

“ ... ”

Ryuunosuke’s words had completely eliminated any arguments.

“Sakurasou will be destroyed, the third-years are graduating, the ponytailed one’s going to leave. The time we have left is short, so if you’ll allow me to be slightly cliched here, I think that you, Kanda, should spend your time creating more memories with the others instead of wasting your time on useless things like this petitioning stuff you’re doing right now.”

Sorata’s mind was swirling. The problem of Sakurasou’s imminent demolition was already enough to push his brain to its limit, and with Nanami’s impending departure the next year adding onto that, he was no longer sure what he needed to protect any longer. Most importantly, he was emotionally crushed.

“I’ve said it many times, and I’ll say it again, there’s a way to save Sakurasou.”

Ryuunosuke spoke, as though to advise them.

“Shut up!”

“If you use Shiina’s departure as a bargaining chip, there’s a possibility that you might be able to convince the Board.”

“I told you to shut up!”

“No matter how much you may deny it, the reason why Sakurasou is going to be destroyed is Shiina herself, and that is a fact. That’s the one thing that you cannot change about this situation.”

Sorata understood him very well, but he was not willing to accept the truth of his words. He brushed all of it off as the adults’ way of thinking, the adult’s sheer selfishness. Mashiro’s talents belonged to herself alone, and her effort was no different. It was by her decision that she directed those talents towards the art of drawing manga, it was her privilege, it was her right as a person to do so, and not for the mere benefit of someone else, it was not something that could be just twisted and manipulated for the sake of another person’s reputation.

All the products of Mashiro’s efforts thus far couldn’t just be selfishly thrown aside by people who barely even understood her. Her very existence wasn’t something that could be just played about on someone else’s fingertips.

All these things that seemed clear to Sorata, however, did not seem to be clear to others. He simply couldn’t accept that, and he yelled: “Why can’t you understand something as simple as this?”

“Ah.”

Nanami who had momentarily averted her gaze towards the corridor appeared to have noticed something.

“Mashiro.”

Sorata promptly looked towards the corridor as well at the very mention of that name.

Mashiro silently walked into the classroom, leaving her position at the door.

“Did...did you hear our conversation?”

Sorata spoke in a gravelly tone, with all the force he could muster.

“Sorata.”

He felt his body jolt as his name was called out, as if shocked by a bolt of electricity. What would Mashiro think if she had heard their conversation?

How would she feel?

Sorata’s heart began thumping so hard within his chest that it began to hurt. However, somehow he could not avert his gaze from her. He couldn’t escape, as an invisible force seemed to be restraining him, rooting him at the spot.

“Sorata, notebook.”

“Hmm?”

Sorata grew somewhat flustered at this unexpected turn of events.

“Notebook.”

What was she talking about?

Just as that thought flashed through his mind, he noticed that there was another girl standing behind Mashiro. She was small and petite, being shorter than Mashiro by at least half a head. Her long hair was tied up in a ponytail that split into two at the end, and this hairstyle was held together by a single rubber band. As their gazes met, she smiled politely, and bowed in greeting.

“May I know who this is?”

“Shiho.”

“Can’t you get rid of that habit of yours? Calling everyone’s names without any honorifics or anything. It’s too abrupt, see, even Shiho-san’s shocked.”

“No she’s not.”

“Yes she is, look at her. Look closely!”

The female student named Shiho had her mouth fixed in a curious smile.

“Anyway, don’t forget to use proper honorifics when speaking with others...like 「-san」 , 「-senpai」 or 「-kouhai」 , you understand?”

“Don’t treat me like an idiot. I do use honorifics with certain people.”

“Hmm, now who could those people be?”

Sorata had never heard her use anything of the sort.



“Tom yum goong.”

“That’s a type of soup, you idiot!”

The female student named Shiho stared blankly at Sorata and Mashiro’s antics the whole time.

But, her shoulders soon began to quake as she laughed uncontrollably. She appeared to have been attempting to hold her laughter in, but to no avail.

“I never knew Shiina-san was the type to make jokes.”

She wasn’t joking, she was actually being serious...Sorata realized that explaining would be too troublesome just as he was about to say that, and so he smiled, hoping the matter would pass.

“I wasn’t joking.”

Mashiro stepped closer to Shiho whilst wearing a poker face. Shiho proceeded to laugh even louder, presumably because she thought Mashiro was just playing along.

“Anyway, Mashiro, what are you both here for?”

Sorata abruptly turned towards Mashiro, having recalled what he was going to ask.

“She said she’d be willing to write her name for us.”

“Huh?”

Sorata uttered, evidently rather surprised at this turn of events.

“Her name, on the notebook.”

“Oh, right.”

Sorata realized that Mashiro was referring to the petition.

He took the notebook out from his bag and spread it out on his desk.

“Please write your name and class here.”

Shiho wrote down her full name, 「Fukatani Shiho」 as instructed, and her class as well, which was the second-year arts class. They had finally gotten their fourth signature.

“Is this alright?”

“Uh, of course...but, why?”

“Shiina-san asked me to. She suddenly came running over to me for something just as I stepped into class, which to be honest surprised me a little. She mentioned that everyone had to sign it.”

“I see. Oi, you there, did you even explain the situation to her properly?”

“I did.”

“Really?”

“I did.”

Sorata looked towards Shiho as if to demand some sort of confirmation. At this, she confessed somewhat awkwardly:

“I was still kinda confused at the start, but after I heard about everything that happened, I’m perfectly fine with this. Although the process of understanding did take a while.”

That wasn't particularly hard to imagine. Mashiro didn't seem to be all that great at explaining matters. Nope, she definitely wasn't. The fact that she thought she had successfully got her point across when she obviously had not only made the situation worse.

"So, I'll be taking my leave. All the best for your petition."

Shiho bowed slightly while smiling, then slowly jogged away from their classroom.

"How many more?"

"What?"

"How many more signatures do we need?"

"...A lot. We need to pretty much fill up this whole thing."

Mashiro flipped through the essentially empty notebook.

"I understand."

They still had a long way to go, and for some reason that very moment felt like eternity to them.

"I'll go and ask more people."

Mashiro said as she prepared to exit the classroom.

Sorata called out to her just as she was leaving, almost reflectively.

"Shiina."

"What?"

She turned around, tilting her head in curiosity.

“No...”

He had some things that he wanted to tell her. He wanted to tell her the reason why the Board wanted to demolish Sakurasou. Mashiro herself had probably overheard their conversation earlier. However, he found himself unable to utter even a single word when faced with her calm, clear stare.

“Sorata?”

He wanted to tell her everything right then and there, as that would probably be the best way out. If he were to miss this opportunity, he might not even be able to gather the courage to talk to her in future. Sorata felt that meeting Mashiro’s gaze grew increasingly difficult, as if the distance between them was increasing right then and there.

As these thoughts swirled within his mind, he decided to speak up.

“You heard our conversation earlier, didn’t you?”

“About the time you wet your bed?”

“Since when were we talking about such things!”

“You claimed that it was raining inside the house and tried to use that as an excuse.”

“Why do you even know about the embarrassing things I did when I was in primary school?”

“Akiko told me.”

“Can you not directly address someone else’s mother by their first name? Also, more importantly, why would she tell you something like that?”

Nanami smiled while watching the two. They must have heard about it from his mother behind his back while they were in Fukuoka...

"That's not it..."

Sorata felt a pang of regret at what he was about to say next, and so he momentarily averted his gaze from Mashiro.

"I was talking about the real reason why Sakurasou is going to be demolished."

Despite this, he managed to finish his sentence clearly.

"I heard it."

Mashiro appeared unexpectedly calm, given the circumstances.

"Is that alright with you?"

"What is?"

Did she simply not mind? Considering it was Mashiro he was talking to, it wouldn't actually be that big of a surprise.

"..."

But was that really the case?

Probably not. She couldn't possibly not care about something like that. It was impossible, it absolutely couldn't be. She had even dragged one of her classmates all the way here for the sake of this petition. For the sake of Sakurasou...

Mashiro treasured Sakurasou as well. Even though her affection for the place may not be that obvious due to her usual lack of emotions, she

couldn't possibly not care about the current situation. Mashiro was human as well, and she was a girl in her second year of high school. She had her own troubles, she too could feel pain, she too had emotional struggle to deal with. Because Sorata had been with Mashiro since April of the previous year, he had been observing her closely for all this time, so he knew that she couldn't possibly be fine with all this. He knew very well that he had made many mistakes in the past simply because he had had the misconception that Mashiro was different from other people.

"Shiina, you can stay in Sakurasou."

"Sorata..."

"It's fine."

"...Mm."

Mashiro looked straight at Sorata.

"We'll definitely succeed, we definitely will not allow them to demolish Sakurasou. I won't let them."

"Yes, we'll definitely succeed together."

Nanami grasped Mashiro's hand.

"Sorata, Nanami."

It wouldn't do them any good to be crying over spilt milk at this point. They had no time to be over-thinking things, nor could they worry too much about the situation. Mashiro had made him realize this just by the simple act of her bringing her classmate over to see them.

They needed to gather signatures. They had to do it no matter what, even if it meant asking every single student within this school.

In order to make sure that all the residents of Sakurasou had no regrets, protecting Sakurasou was now the most important task they had to carry out.

Sorata slowly surveyed his surroundings. Due to the commotion earlier, they had attracted quite a fair bit of attraction, and his eyes met with many of his classmates' as he looked around him. They immediately averted their glances, causing Sorata to smile bitterly. But, now was not the time to be worrying about pathetic things like pride or dignity.

There was only one thing he needed to do.

"There's something I need to ask of you all."

There was only one thing he could do. Although gathering the signatures of two-thirds of the student body may be an unreachable goal, if they didn't begin their journey now, they would never be able to reach the finish line.

"I hope that all of you can help us achieve our goal."

Part 3

Soon, a week passed since their petitioning activities began.

Their daily life soon evolved into something resembling a schedule, with activities being carried out before and after school, not including recess periods, while at night they would review their results for the day and discuss future strategies in Sakurasou's dining room...it was all incredibly exhausting. As virtually all the time they had was filled up with such activities, time for them seemed to pass quicker as well.

They had finally acquired over a hundred signatures between Monday and Saturday. In order to achieve their goal, they still had to gather seven times that amount.

Today was the twenty-seventh of February. The next day would be the final day of the month, and that very day was the last Sunday of the month.

If they were to consider their deadline as the graduation ceremony on March the 8th, they would only have one more week to carry out their activities.

They had nowhere near enough time.

Even so, they had achieved quite decent results considering the short period of time they had been given. Since merely calling for signatures at the school gates wasn't enough, Sorata, Nanami, Mashiro, Misaki and Jin began to split up and gather signatures from the individual classes starting from the second week. They even managed to get their school's media club to advertise their petition through the lunchtime announcements, and the school newspaper to interview them.

Although these tactics had definitely succeeded in giving them the publicity they needed, sadly they did not manage to acquire any definite results.

Even Sorata began to feel agitated.

"I believe I have mentioned that the judging on March the 7th will be an internal round. I'm sorry but I'm afraid Kanda-san will not be able to directly participate in the presentation itself..."

"..."

He had already done everything he could think of.

"Thus, the actual presentation will be done by me..."

"..."

But, it was nowhere near enough.

“Kanda-san.”

“...”

What could he do to instantly get a lot of signatures for their petition?

“Kanda-san?”

“Huh? Ah, w-what is it?”

He looked up to see a worried Fujisawa Kazuki staring back down at him.

“You seemed to be a little distracted today.”

“N-No, it’s fine. I’m sorry”

On that day, Sorata was having a discussion with Kazuki in order to prepare for the judging of his proposal the next week.

“Do you have some other pressing matters to take care of? Aside from the judging, of course.”

“Well...”

As Sorata stumbled momentarily, trying to form the words to express his current predicament, Kazuki briskly stood up from his seat.

“Let’s take a quick break.”

“Huh? No, wait...”

They had been discussing for little more than ten minutes.

"You'll be able to do your job much better once you get yourself back on your feet."

"...I'm sorry."

Sorata could only apologize meekly, given how considerate Kazuki was being towards him.

"So, did something happen?"

"It isn't really something that I need to worry you about...would you still like to hear it?"

"Yes, I would."

"Actually..."

Sorata chose his words carefully, and began describing to Kazuki, in chronological sequence, the events that had occurred from the day they had discovered Sakurasou was going to be demolished until the present, where they were carrying out petitioning activities. He also mentioned how they were having difficulties in gathering signatures, and that the real reason why Sakurasou was going to be demolished was because of Mashiro...

"I see, so it's that important. I understand why you seemed distracted earlier now."

"I'm sorry."

"But, you're right. If you have something this pressing to take care of, would you like to withdraw from the judging next week and go back now? For the sake of your precious Sakurasou."

"What?"

“Even if you choose to do so, I won’t mind.”

Sorata had no idea whether Kazuki’s words were true. However, all of that didn’t matter to him at all.

“...How could I possibly do that!”

He couldn’t go back. Although the whole Sakurasou thing was definitely important to him, he couldn’t just waste this hard-earned opportunity. He had submitted countless drafts, and felt the same pain in his chest countless times as those drafts were turned down, time and again...even so, he had persevered and not given up, until he finally got the chance to get to where he was. Sorata knew that very well.

Sakurasou was important. The judging of his proposal was equally important. Sorata had already promised himself that he would definitely pass.

Conflicting emotions began to surface within him as well, as he simply did not have the right to say that both sides of the equation were important. The results of the judging would definitely affect his future to a great degree. But despite this, he just couldn’t give up on Sakurasou for the sake of his goal, as Ryuunosuke had advised him to. The very thought of giving up on Sakurasou made him feel as if his body would split open.

The converse was also true. He couldn’t ignore his preparations for the judging and spend all his effort on Sakurasou either. He had not only got Kazuki to make time to come and see him during his days off, but also gotten lots of help from the residents of Sakurasou before he had passed the initial judging itself.

But, considering all the circumstances, what should he do?

“I guess I may have put it a little too bluntly.”

Kazuki relaxed his expression before the glum-looking Sorata.

“But, I’m sure you understand now, don’t you?”

“...Understand what?”

Sorata understood nothing. He was enveloped in darkness, he had difficulty breathing, his body was tightly bound, restrained by all the burdens he had to bear.

“In a catch-22 situation like this, I’m willing to bet that no man wouldn’t want to just ditch everything and run away from all responsibilities and troubles.”

“...Yeah.”

“But, if you were to avoid facing the problem here and run away for real, you won’t be solving anything. You’ll just feel relaxed for that very brief moment...but in the end, all that will be waiting for you is regret.”

“I understand.”

“I think that everyone meets a dilemma like this sometime within their lives. A time where, no matter how much they may complain or fuss about, they have to tackle vast amounts of problems, one at a time. More annoyingly, the more important the things concerned are to them, the more the problems come at them from all fronts. Fate, as we call it, is actually a cruel thing.”

Kazuki smiled bitterly, seemingly having remembered something from his past.

“Something like this had happened to me before as well. I remember it like it was yesterday, back when I was just a student...I had someone that I liked.”

Namely, Chihiro.

Kazuki averted his gaze, and he looked out through the window at the sprawling industrial district that laid before the both of them.

“Back when I was just about to graduate for university, I was running all over the place, trying to establish the very company I own this very moment. My goal was just within my grasp, and I was incredibly excited. Although my days were busy, they were fulfilling and most of all, fun.”

“...”

“Just then, the person I liked was facing a crisis - whether to continue drawing in the hopes of making it big, or to just become an art teacher...”

“...”

“She came to me to discuss the matter as well. However, I just didn’t have the time to think it through with her.”

“Didn’t you worry about her at all?”

Kazuki merely smiled in response.

“Back then, I believe that the only mature thing to do in such situations was to choose the thing that mattered to me more, and sacrifice everything else on the other side of the balance. I felt that my dream, my goal was important enough for me to put her on that other side.”

“So, was it not?”

“I don’t deny it. The decision I made back then allowed me to be where I am now. In reality, the best way to make decisions is to simplify the options so much that they are reduced to nothing but 0s and 1s. Sometimes making decisive choices like this can bag you strong

commendations as well. However, as to whether I think this is truly mature, as of now I'll have to say no to that."

"So, in your current opinion, who do you think is truly mature, Fujisawa-san?"

"I guess I aim to be someone who can face any situation with a soft attitude."

"A soft attitude?"

"A soft attitude means the ability to gently cushion and accept anything hard and sharp that comes your way, then softly repelling and flipping those things over. If two hard objects knock against each other, both will be damaged, but if I am soft, I won't harm myself nor my surroundings. However, as for my job as a producer, I hope I can always stay sharp."

Kazuki smiled as he said this. It was a passionate smile, one that would leave a deep impression on anyone.

"I think that you're a really kind and gentle person, especially with your actions and words."

"I guess I might have actually grew more sincere over the past ten years, considering I'm able to make you feel this way."

"..."

"I personally think that not making up your mind is the worst thing to do."

"Making up my mind..."

"No matter if you choose one, or the other, or even both at once. As long as you take the time to actually think about what you're going to do and how you're going to do it, then reach your own conclusion, it's fine."

"I see..."

"Yes. Also, the other most important thing is, once you decide you must not hesitate. Conversely, the worst thing to do is to not decide on anything, and simply let yourself be swept along with the flow. Even if you luck out and stumble upon the result you expected, you won't gain any bit of experience from the ordeal; and if you screw yourself over, the only thing you can do is regret."

Kazuki's words were exceptionally memorable, as they stemmed from his own experiences.

"However, please don't get me wrong. I'm not telling you to not worry, you understand? I think that it's better if you worry as much as you can as long as time allows it. That's very important. Even if it's painful, you have to worry. No one goes through their entire life without worries, and running away from your problems only make them seem more fearsome."

Kazuki smiled and sipped his coffee. He furrowed his brow, probably because it was a little too bitter.

"I have decided."

Kazuki stared at me, compelling me to make my decision.

"I'm going to concentrate on the judging next week and nothing else. So, please continue."

"Well then, I'll be getting to the main topic now."

Kazuki nodded, instantly shifting over to his working personality.

The discussion with Kazuki went on from three in the afternoon to seven in the evening.

Although they had successfully completed and organized the contents of their proposal, they reduced the scale of the project for the sake of cutting costs, so they needed more creativity to compensate that. Despite this, like what Kazuki had said, thinking with a tired mind won't produce any efficient results, so he had sent Sorata off to think about what they should be improving for the next week.

After that, Kazuki treated Sorata to dinner. It was about nine PM when Sorata returned to Sakurasou.

The long duration of the discussion had worn him out, and it was true that his tired brain did affect even his physical performance. If he hadn't eaten dinner, he might have collapsed by then.

Sorata waited for the doors of the train to open before following the tuxedo-wearing man in front of him onto the balcony of the station.

He walked towards the ticketing counter.

Suddenly, he spotted a familiar figure getting down from the train car ahead of him. A figure who sported a pretty-looking ponytail at the back of her head.

"Nanami."

Sorata called out to her from behind, causing Nanami's shoulders to tremble faintly. As she turned around, spotting as she did so, her shocked expression gradually grew calmer.

"Oh, so it was just you."

"Is there something about me that disappoints you?"

Nanami ignored Sorata's jibe, and instead continued:

"So you too are coming back at this hour."

"Yep."

"The same train, too."

Sorata caught up to Nanami, and the two strode off together.

For some reason, Sorata felt that Nanami was distancing herself from him.

"Did I do something wrong to you lately?"

"...I'm sweating since I had lessons earlier."

Nanami's tone sounded vaguely as if she was throwing a tantrum.

"It's not like I mind..."

Although Sorata said this, he unconsciously began taking note of her smell. There was a tangy, fragrant odor coming off of Nanami.

"It does smell pretty good."

"W-What are you saying!"

"It's like both sweet and sour, it smells tasty."

Nanami distanced herself from Sorata even more, or to be precise, she began to run away.

"Huh? Wait up!"

"Don't come near me, pervert!"

Sorata got a rather bad scolding.

The two continued to stay apart from each other, and they passed through the ticketing counters separately.

As they reached the rows of shops on their way back home, Nanami stopped running away from Sorata, but she was still unwilling to close the distance of about three meters between them.

Keeping this bizarre distance between them, the two walked through the rows of shops that had already closed for the day, on a lonely street that was faintly lit by a few streetlights and nothing else. A full moon was out that night, casting down gentle rays of moonlight onto them.

“Um...I really can’t get used to this, can I please just walk next to you already?”

“Promise you won’t say anything weird?”

“Promise.”

“Then it’s fine.”

Nanami snapped back into her usual accent and walked back towards Sorata.

“This is the last day of your vocal training lessons, isn’t it?”

“Yep, the last one.”

“Two years already?”

“Yep.”

Their conversation sounded as if the both of them were carefully savoring this moment.

“Two years already?”

“Why did you ask that twice?”

“It’s nothing, I just felt like, you know, time flies.”

“Yeah, it does.”

“The lessons end after two years, right?”

“They do.”

Sorata had previously heard about how the training lessons worked. No matter whether or not their students passed the auditions for the agency, every single one of them graduated after two years.

Naturally, there was no option to simply continue training for another year and then try again the next time.

“That’s pretty finite. Wouldn’t it be fine if everyone could just continue taking lessons over at that place until they’re all accepted into the agency?”

“True. That’s what I thought at first.”

“So, did you change your mind?”

“Not exactly...but, now I think I understand why it all ends after two years.”

Sorata thought for a brief moment.

“Having a time limit on you allows you to concentrate more...right?”

“I guess that’s partly the reason. However, every single person over at that place doesn’t need an incentive like that to work hard.”

“Hmm, that’s true. So then, why is it so?”

“I think they’re giving people a chance to give up.”

Nanami uttered something completely unexpected as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Sorata’s jaw dropped, betraying his surprise.

“Every year, the training classes have sixty slots open, and among those sixty people, only two or three make it into the agency. Even among the lucky few, there’s no guarantee that any one of them will be able to continue holding onto their job for long. The ones that can make it big are extremely few, and the majority of this minority are one-hit wonders; their fame dies down after a brief while.”

“It feels more harsh now that you put it that way.”

The odds of someone getting into the agency from the training lessons were about twenty or thirty to one. Getting into the agency itself was the real start, as anything that happened from that point onward would be up to your own effort.

“When you try your best to achieve your dreams, you’ll naturally miss out on these harsh truths. No, to be precise, you’ll intentionally ignore them...”

Thinking too much would be nothing more than a nuisance. Pessimism was even worse, as it directly hindered one from taking the first step on a journey.

At this point, Sorata had a vague idea of what Nanami was getting at.

“So, your point is, in order to allow people to realize this, the course lasts for only two years?”

"Yep. I think it means that we should slow down our footsteps for now, and to continue thinking about what we should do next. If we don't make some sacrifices and decisions, time will just slip past us slowly and surely, and we won't ever be able to get our acts together."

"That's cruel."

"But, I guess that's what makes it worthwhile. The next thing to do would be to continue learning over at other training facilities, to continue pursuing your dreams, or even altering those dreams slightly for a career over in theater...of course, many have given up, as that in fact seems to be the most popular option."

"I see."

"When someone can't make it, telling that person they can't might be a form of gentleness."

"Yeah, I guess it would kind of make others feel terrible if one were to irresponsibly offer them words of encouragement and the like when they clearly have no hope."

Harshness is also a form of being considerate toward others. Even so, being told that you can't make it would definitely be painful...

"I say..."

"Hmm?"

"Aoyama, why did you decide to pursue a career in voice acting?"

"Have I never told you?"

"Nope, you haven't."

“Promise not to laugh?”

“Is the reason behind it really that silly?”

“You meanie, stop picking on me.”

Nanami puffed up her cheeks in protest. That expression rarely appeared on her face, but she seemed cute whenever it did, as if she were throwing a mini-tantrum.

“I promise not to laugh, so please tell me.”

For whatever reason, Nanami sighed as though she were fed up with him.

If he were to say anything at this point, the topic of conversation might change, so Sorata decided to shut up.

“During Japanese lessons back in primary school, the teachers would call students out one by one to read out passages from textbooks, right?”

“Yeah. I was never good at that.”

He could never seem to successfully read out loud seamlessly, as he would always stutter and mumble for whatever reason. This made him jealous of his classmates who could.

“I loved it.”

Although Sorata himself had never seen anything of the sort, a vivid image of Nanami standing up perfectly straight while holding her textbook in front of her appeared in his head.

“I think it was back in grade four when I realized that my reading was beginning to draw commendations from many teachers. They all said things like ‘Aoyama-san, you have a great voice’. Since I had never

received any compliments of the sort regarding any of my other areas, I was rather happy to hear that...and for whatever reason, it made me believe that my voice was special, different from the others, which gave me self-confidence."

"I don't think I've ever been complimented on anything before..."

Nanami smiled warmly.

"I think that's the reason. I grew an interest in jobs that required the use of one's voice, like anime voice acting, narrating, movie making, radio advertisement announcers, television...as soon as I found out that many related jobs existed, I grew increasingly interested in that form of career, and I even imitated people who were already working in the industry. It was then that I found out there were training agencies that existed for such a thing, so I decided to give it a try."

Probably in order to hide her own embarrassment, Nanami added a small "Silly, isn't it?" to the end of her story, and smiled.

"But your father was against it?"

"Yes, and he was against me leaving my hometown as well, not to mention attending training lessons. I had gathered all my courage to ask him permission to do those things, but I was immediately shot down instead."

"And you still managed to run away from home?"

"I think it was precisely because I was rejected that I ran away."

"Huh?"

"If my parents had agreed to the whole thing just like that, thinking about it, I might not even be here right now. It was because my father had told me 'Absolutely not', that I figured that I would show him what

I've got. You've gotta have this kind of attitude to get things properly done, you know?"

"I see, that might be true after all."

A rebellious spirit would make for excellent motivation under these circumstances, even more so if one were angry and acting on impulse. The more unreasonable the decision may be, the more likely one's body would be able to get up and carry it out.

"If so, maybe your father simply denied your request because he saw through this point."

"That's absolutely impossible."

Nanami, whose tone was calm and collected earlier, suddenly grew crisp and defensive. She seemed angry, maybe because she had yet to forgive her father.

The conversation was therefore interrupted briefly.

"..."

"..."

The two of them walked a slight distance, not saying a thing to each other.

Something like that would never happen normally, but then again no new topics of conversation seemed to appear.

The two walked under the dazzling, blinding streetlights.

Sorata looked over at Nanami who was walking straight ahead of him, and he couldn't help but wonder whether she was thinking the same thing as he was.

“Aoyama.”

“What is it?”

Nanami looked over at Sorata.

“About what’s going to happen after April.”

“So you were thinking about that after all.”

“Yes, I was.”

“You sounded a little like Mashiro back there.”

Nanami chuckled.

She looked up at the night sky and said:

“I thought that I would get to stay in Sakurasou until I graduated.”

Sorata had believed that without a doubt as well.

“But, I guess it’s like what Akasaka-san said.”

Nanami who was still looking into the distance had a cheery, relaxed expression on her face.

“Aoyama, do you plan to leave?”

Nanami ignored this question, and instead quoted Ryuunosuke.

“Sakurasou isn’t a place where you can just stay in at your own whim.”

“That, um, that’s true...but that’s Akasaka’s way of thinking.”

“Akasaka-san really loves to lecture others. He’s always so conceited...but, on the other hand, he’s absolutely right, so I guess I don’t have anything to say.”

Nanami rarely described others like so.

At the same time, Sorata noticed that Nanami was being exceptionally talkative. That probably had something to do with the audition results, or maybe because her training lessons that had been going on for two full years had finally ended today. It was probably a bit of both. Everyone grows slightly sentimental at important moments, and in the midst of hiding the fact that they’re different from their usual selves, they end up appearing completely different from their usual selves anyway.

“I wonder what Rita likes about Akasaka-san anyway?”

“Isn’t it because he loves to lecture others, he’s conceited, but on the other hand he’s always right?”

“I still don’t get it...”

Nanami smiled.

“But I guess I have to thank him anyway.”

“Thank Akasaka?”

Nanami nodded.

“He reminded me that making your decisions is extremely important. You can’t let yourself be forced by anyone, you have to decide for yourself how you’re going to do things.”

“True.”

He had discussed the same thing with Kazuki as well. To worry as much as time allowed, to think, to understand, and to achieve the solution. He told Sorata how important those things were.

“So, I’ve decided to think.”

That wasn’t the answer Sorata was expecting. But, there was one thing which was definite. Nanami didn’t take Ryuunosuke’s words as idiotic ramblings and ignored them, instead she treated them seriously and accepted them. Which meant that there were equal possibilities that she might or might not be leaving Sakurasou.

Which meant Sorata could not butt in. The person to think was Nanami; the person to worry was Nanami; and the person to decide would also be Nanami.

“Anyway, most importantly we need to protect Sakurasou first.”

If they didn’t, Nanami would have no reason to worry. It had taken her a lot of courage to face this problem.

“That’s true...this is for Mashiro as well.”

“Huh?”

“Why do you look so surprised by that?”

“No I’m not.”

“Although you’re supposed to be in charge of taking care of Mashiro, it doesn’t mean I don’t care, you know?”

“I know that.”

Misaki and Jin probably felt the same as well.

“If I were in her shoes, I definitely wouldn’t be able to pretend as if nothing had happened, and I would feel as if Sakurasou’s impending demolition was my fault, and feel completely crushed.”

“Yeah.”

“If Sakurasou really were to disappear, I wouldn’t know what to do, and I might even be haunted by those memories for a long time. If that were to happen, I wouldn’t be able to spend time with my friends from Sakurasou any longer. I would be plagued by guilt and probably be unable to face any single one of you...”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“Yeah. I’m not going to just sit here and let all these precious days we once had together be broken down into bitter memories.”

“Of course.”

As they talked, the two of them finally reached the slight incline that lead towards Sakurasou. They headed towards it step by step.

The construction site beside Sakurasou which had been set up that very year had had its basic construction completed since the previous month, and now that its supporting columns had been added to its skeleton, the shape of the building could almost be seen. February was almost over, making people realize the passage of time still continued.

As the two of them were about ten meters away from Sakurasou, they spotted a presence outside its gates.

From the presence’s aura itself, they could tell it was Mashiro. She stood there mysteriously, draped by the gentle moonlight.

“What’s she doing now?”

Mashiro was looking up at Sakurasou from the other side of the road.

Nanami approached her while calling out to her, causing her to turn around slowly.

“Welcome back.”

“Yep, I’m back.”

“Me too.”

“What are you doing?”

“Looking at Sakurasou.”

“I would appreciate it if you could include the reason behind that with your explanation.”

Mashiro thought it over briefly.

“Because I just wanted to?”

“So you don’t have a reason in particular.”

Sorata was already used to conversations like this, as not everything Mashiro did could be expected to have a reason behind it.

Mashiro once again began to stare blankly up at Sakurasou.

“ ... ”

No, there might actually be some meaning to it. If their petition were unsuccessful, Sakurasou would be demolished. This very view that they could now take in at any time, could very well become something that they would never be able to experience ever again.

To make matters worse, Mashiro knew that she was the reason why that may be the case.

“Right.”

Mashiro turned towards Sorata and Nanami, having seemingly remembered something. Just as Sorata wondered what could it be, Mashiro ignored him and passed an envelope to Nanami.

“This came in the mail.”

Nanami’s nonchalant expression instantly froze as she saw the letter. They didn’t need to ask to know why; they didn’t even need to think to know why. That was because the name of the voice acting agency was written on the top of the envelope.

The results of her auditions had came in the mail.

Due to his nervousness, Sorata’s stomach felt upset. He wanted to say something, but he could only manage to take a few breaths as overwhelming amounts of pressure overwhelmed him. What he felt was no longer nervousness, it was pure, absolute terror.

He had never been this tense before even when receiving his examination results, nor even during his proposal’s judging. He knew that it was none of his business...no, it was BECAUSE that it was none of his business that he felt that he couldn’t possibly shoulder this pressure. Because he was unable to do anything about it, he felt terror at the sheer prospect of not knowing what may happen next.

Nanami breathed slowly and closed her eyes.

“Right.”

She mumbled softly and ripped open the envelope right there.

Inside was a piece of paper that had been folded three times.

Nanami quickly glanced through its contents.

Since earlier, Sorata's heart rate had done nothing but continue to increase. Although it was not the results of his own presentation, he felt as if his body was being restrained by an invisible power.

It was scary. It was genuinely horrifying. He wanted to run away right there, before he could get the chance to hear the verdict. However, his body refused to listen to his commands.

Nanami looked up from the slip of paper, then sighed in such a fashion as if she were simply taking a deep breath.

Sorata attempted to make out what that action meant, but he couldn't do it.

"So, how was it?"

He asked, unable to contain his nervousness.

Their gazes met, and Nanami's expression relaxed, culminating in a gentle smile. There were no tears in her eyes, nearly causing Sorata to cheer with glee.

"I failed."

Nanami's subsequent words caused Sorata's jubilant cheers to remain stuck in his throat, never to surface again.

"..."

He was unable to speak.

"I failed."

Nanami repeated once again.

“You’re joking...”

Nanami held out the slip of paper towards Sorata.

He quickly skimmed through the words printed on it, and what he saw there was that she failed. She had not misread.

But, how?

How could Nanami still possibly stand in front of him this calmly despite failing?

Sorata’s facial expressions crumpled in utter defeat.

He had thought that she would cry.

He had thought that if she had failed, she would definitely cry.

He had believed that even if she were in front of both him and Mashiro, she would still cry.

But what was this?

Nanami smiled calmly.

“Because I did everything I could.”

It was nothing as he had expected it to be.

“I have no regrets.”

It was impossible.

“Ah... It’s all over.”

“It can’t be!”

Sorata cried out.

“Kanda-san?”

The smile finally disappeared from Nanami’s face.

“What kind of sick joke is this! You did everything you could? You have no regrets? I’m sure that your dreams can’t possibly be dismissed with simple words like those!”

“...”

He couldn’t see her expression, as she was looking down.

“These two years you spent can’t just be brushed off like that!”

“...”

He could see that Nanami was biting her lip.

“You don’t have to restrain yourself.”

“...”

Despite this, Nanami continued to not make a sound.

“It’s fine, you can cry if you want to. No one’s going to laugh at you, you can’t possibly not cry now.”

Nanami’s shoulders were trembling. Sorata thought that she had finally began to cry, but it was not the case.

"I'm going to hold myself back."

"Why?"

"OF COURSE I HAVE TO!"

Nanami clenched her teeth and directed her razor-sharp glaze in Sorata's direction, a gaze that contained her strong-willed personality, the part of her that would never back down...the teardrops in her eyes sparkled, reflecting the glow coming off of the streetlights. However, her tears never fell, and they soon dried off in the wind.

"But why?"

"If I were to cry now, I wouldn't be able to do anything."

She manifested her emotions into words, slowly piercing through Sorata's body.

"Now Sakurasou's in a position where it might be destroyed, and even the petitioning activities...I don't want to throw everything away like nothing matters...I don't want to let myself fall into such a miserable state."

Nanami wasn't planning to back down. Sorata could almost feel her painful thoughts.

"Don't forget that Kamiigusa-senpai and Mitaka-senpai's graduation ceremony is right ahead of us. I don't want to make them worry. I want to send them off with a smile on my face!"

"Aoyama."

"If I cry now, all those things will never happen..."

"But..."

If Nanami were to continue on this way, neither Misaki nor Jin would be happy with it. Most importantly, it did not benefit herself in any way.

"I'm perfectly fine."

That was impossible.

"I'm perfectly fine."

Nanami repeated again, more strongly this time, having sensed Sorata's thoughts.

"Just until the graduation ceremony. After it's over, I'll cry my heart out. I promise you that."

"..."

Sorata couldn't bring himself to nod in agreement despite Nanami's words. There were nine more days until the graduation ceremony. Nine more. Sorata couldn't tell whether that period was long or short.

"So, I beg you. Please don't say a word about this to Kamiigusa-senpai or Mitaka-senpai. Mashiro too."

Before Sorata could respond, he heard footsteps approaching from within Sakurasou. The footsteps grew louder and louder at a rather fast speed, and the front door was violently jerked open. Misaki stood behind it. For some reason, she was wearing a bear costume.

"Hear me out, Kouhai-kun!"

A cheery voice that didn't fit the atmosphere at all echoed throughout the street.

“I’ve got an idea regarding how to collect more signatures~! I call it
「Operation Costumes! The Forest Animals Saw It!」 ”

“ ... ”

“Hmm? What’s going on?”

Misaki still detected the tense atmosphere anyway, and she tilted her head to the side, causing the head of her costume to come apart slightly.

“What’s with the lack of energy, you two!”

It would probably be better to tell Misaki now. Regarding Nanami...

“So, from today onward, Nanamin, Mashiron, come help too! I’ve already prepared suitable costumes for the both of you.”

Misaki promptly grabbed hold of the both of them and walked into Sakurasou.

On the way there, Mashiro turned around and looked back at him once, and although her gaze seemed to hint that she had something to say, she left it unsaid.

Sorata never managed to stop Misaki.

“ ... ”

That was because the words he planned to utter had already disappeared down the back of his throat.

“...Why did I...”

He planned to scream those words out loud, but for some reason he could barely utter a sound.

The demolition of Sakurasou was confirmed, and the very reason lay with Mashiro herself. He still had some homework and touch-ups to do with regards to his proposal. Their petitioning activities were not going well, he wasn't in good relations with Ryuunosuke as the both of them had not said a single word to each other since they had argued on that day, not even through text messages nor online chat rooms.

His problems were beginning to pile upon each other, and the pile only grew taller, until he could no longer see its peak. With Nanami's failure adding onto it...it was clearly not the time for her to be forcing herself. He knew that he couldn't let her do so, but he could no longer move.

Both of Sorata's hands were filled with burdens he could hardly bear.

February 27th

The Sakurasou meeting records for that day had a few painful lines written there.

- Let's continue working hard by getting more signatures!

Secretary·Kamiigusa Misaki

- It must! Our petitioning must succeed! We will graduate with smiles on our faces! Addition·Aoyama Nanami

- I'll do my best. Addition·Shiina Mashiro

Chapter 2 – Dashing Through Those Brilliant Days

Part 1

It was the very last day of February. The 28th, a Monday, was a

comfortably bright day with clear blue skies everywhere. The gentle rays of the sun served as an indication of the coming spring, as it was warm enough outside, that wearing a coat was no longer necessary. In short, the weather was simply delightful.

The students of Suiko differed slightly in their mannerisms as well, as compared to the winter where they scrunched up their bodies due to the cold, they now stood slightly straighter, no longer having to face the harrowing winds of the wintertime. A refreshing, calming atmosphere seemed to be draped all over the school.

However, Sorata's mood had not cleared up even in the slightest, as it had been extremely cloudy since the day before. Gigantic black circles were painted around his eyes, clearly showing his lack of sleep.

Although he had managed, albeit just barely, to survive the morning classes without falling asleep, he was ravaged by violent urges to pass out during the afternoon.

I might as well sleep.

Despite the fact that this thought had flashed across his mind plenty of times, through some form of twisted miracle, he simply couldn't fall asleep even as he closed his eyes and slumped onto his desk. Even his teacher's voice which previously served him as an excellent lullaby proved useless this time around. Shiroyama Koharu's devastatingly effective Modern Japanese class was somehow deflected by Sorata's sheer force of will as well, and he somehow sat through all of it.

His body didn't feel quite right, as though he were afflicted by the symptoms one gets before a fever. He felt light-headed and somewhat heavier, and he was plagued by an overly warm sensation that just

wouldn't go away.

Even so, a quick check using a thermometer proved that he did not actually have one.

If he really was sick, then the sickness was probably a psychological one.

His troubled, tormented soul was gradually corroding his body.

It was already past five in the morning by the time he had lost consciousness the previous night. Since he had been woken up by Misaki just an hour later anyway, one might as well call that period an extended daydream instead of actual sleep.

His mind was inexplicably clear. Although he wanted to sleep, he was unable to stop thinking. He couldn't stop thinking about Nanami.

In the end, Sorata couldn't manage to sleep at all even until the end of the sixth period of lessons.

Just like that, he managed to pull through to the final period of school, homeroom.

Nanami, who just happened to be on duty that day promptly gave the command "Class, stand." After which she continued with another curt "Class, bow", while one of his classmates nonchalantly called out: "Right, see ya'll~"

Since the floor needed to be swept, Sorata and his classmates pushed all the tables and chairs towards the back of the classroom.

Sorata held in another out of a countless series of yawns he had that day,

causing tears to well up in his eyes.

“Oh come on, Kanda-san, get yourself together.”

Nanami puffed up her cheeks visibly.

“We’re doing all this for Mashiro, after all.”

“Yeah, I know...”

In drastic contrast to the slightly dopey Sorata, Nanami’s expression was cheery, and her eyes shone with energy. He had examined her closely this morning as well, only to find that there were no signs that she had been crying. For these past two years, she had sacrificed even her own free time just to strive towards her goal of becoming a voice actress. Although this path had been sealed when she failed to pass her auditions, she did not shed a single tear.

She even had the time and effort to motivate Sorata. Which, of course, should have been the other way round.

“I’ll be off to gather some signatures from the people over at the netball club then.”

Nanami half-skipped, half-walked out of the classroom.

Her seemingly natural actions were all too coerced in Sorata’s eyes. It was no surprise, since Nanami was simply forcing herself. However, it was already too late for him to say anything. If he had anything to say, he should have said it the previous day. Nanami could only have cried the day before.

"This is pretty hard to understand."

He heard a voice from behind him. The owner was Ryuunosuke, who was currently stuffing his laptop computer back into his backpack.

"What is?"

He asked despite already knowing the answer.

"You and the ponytailed one, why do you insist on continuing down that same path when you know all that lies ahead of you is failure?"

"That's because..."

Sorata began his sentence with those two words in an attempt to get a brief reprieve to organize his thoughts. However, he realized there was absolutely no need for that as the answer was already before him, he had known it for the longest time.

"That's because we don't need any reasons."

Sorata nonchalantly spoke the words that suddenly surfaced in his mind. Yes, there was no need for any reasons, all they had was pure emotions. Thus they had nothing to lose, and they had simply chosen this visibly unwise choice just because they felt the primal urge to do so.

"The choice that requires the least effort to make in this case just happens to be the choice we least feel like making."

"Don't forget that in the end the one that'll be hurt the most is you."

"It's fine even if that happens."

Sorata himself knew that what he was doing was stupid. Despite this, there were some times where he could do intelligent things.

Like now, even when talking to someone with completely opposing opinions from his like Ryuunosuke, he could somehow remain calm. It may have been because he was in a strange mental state due to his severe lack of sleep. In his current situation, it was almost a blessing. Currently, he could discuss things calmly with Ryuunosuke.

"I still don't understand you."

"Say, Akasaka."

Ryuunosuke shot a glance at him that said, "What?"

"Would it really not matter to you if Sakurasou were demolished?"

Sorata asked candidly.

In that instant, Ryuunosuke's eyebrow twitched slightly.

"I believe I've mentioned this before, this problem has nothing to do with whether it matters or not."

"But that's exactly the problem that I want you to consider."

"..."

"I'm not asking you this based on any psychological theories or whatever, I just want to know how you personally feel."

"I'm not interested."

Ryuunosuke promptly looked away from Sorata and continued packing his things.

Sorata didn't back down at this, and he continued to call out to him.

"To be honest, I think that you're pretty amazing for being able to say something like that so decisively."

Ryuunosuke stopped in his tracks, but did not turn around.

"It's amazing that you can look at things so logically and act based purely on logical reasoning. I'm pretty jealous. Because any sort of determination requires effort."

"..."

"But that's exactly why I don't believe that it's possible for you to feel nothing at all about this. You can't possibly have nothing to say."

Although it never showed on her expressions, Mashiro thought about a lot of things as well. She thought, she worried, and she felt pain. Not a person in the world was an exception.

"..."

Ryuunosuke continued to stand at his original position, not moving a single inch.

"I've always been wanting to toss aside all this logical reasoning and talk to you about your feelings, how you really feel...or should I say I

still feel like doing so. About Sakurasou, and about everything else.”

“ ... ”

“Previously I might not have been able to properly make you understand because I wasn’t clear enough about things.”

“ ... ”

“If you feel the same way as I do, then I still hope that you could participate in our petitioning activities. I believe you previously said something along the lines of this? ‘The time we have left is short, so using this time to create more memories would be the more productive option.’ I think what we’re doing now is creating memories, and I don’t care even if this petitioning activity becomes Sakurasou’s final memory. Amongst all these things, there’s me, there’s Mashiro, there’s Aoyama, there’s Jin-senpai and there’s Misaki-senpai...if we have you too, Akasaka, if all of us from Sakurasou could be together, I don’t care if this becomes our final memory together.”

“That’s a pretty selfish way of putting it. Don’t drag me down with you.”

“I wasn’t planning to force you. So...so, please...”

Sorata took a deep breath. Then, he spoke his mind, nonchalantly and sincerely.

“We’re waiting for you, Akasaka, because you’re really important to all of us here at Sakurasou.”

“Now that’s truly a waste of time.”

Ryuunosuke calmly walked out of the classroom. Sorata didn't bother to catch up with him, nor did he wish to call out to him.

What he just said was everything.

Everything he had been meaning to say all to him all this while had been said.

So, he had believed in him and continued waiting.

Because he believed in him.

Part 2

Sorata and Ryuunosuke quickly left the classroom as they finished their conversation so as not to draw unwanted attention from their classmates.

I'll go get Mashiro first.

Ever since they had begun their petitioning activities, almost every single day after homeroom, Mashiro would appear in Sorata's classroom and say to Sorata:

"Sorata, let's get moving."

While looking rather pumped. However, she was nowhere to be seen.

Sorata walked towards the arts classrooms, thinking that she was probably being held back by homeroom. As he did so, he happened to bump straight into Chihiro while going down a flight of stairs.

"Ah!"

He couldn't help but cry out.

"What's with that horrified reaction?"

Chihiro appeared from top to bottom to be completely fed up with things, and she squinted her eyes at him.

Sorata wished that she had just kept quiet. So many things had happened that he had still yet to rearrange his thoughts, and also since he had been informed that Sakurasou was about to be demolished, a mild tension had begun to brew between him and Chihiro, so they had yet to say a single word to each other.

Thus, it was inevitable that his thoughts were scrambled after colliding into her.

Despite this, Chihiro seemed completely at ease.

"You showed up at just the right time. Here, take this."

She even nonchalantly shoved the gigantic easel she was holding at Sorata.

"What's this all of a sudden?"

"It's an easel, can't you tell?"

Chihiro looked at Sorata as though he were an idiot. Which was needless to say an expression no teacher should be using on her students.

"I meant why are you asking me to hold this!"

"Because it's heavy. Do you have a problem with that?"

"I'm pretty sure you're the one with a problem, shoving things on your students without any rhyme or reason!"

"Well then, please put this over at the arts classroom."

She completely ignored Sorata's complaints.

"Do it yourself!"

"Nah. Too troublesome."

"Implying it's not troublesome for me?"

"Even your personality is troublesome. I should've taught you to be obedient."

"Go resign from your job as a teacher this instant!"

"Man~ you're noisy. Don't be so narrow-minded, will ya? Weren't you going to the arts classroom anyway? Just do it, it's along the way."

"I'm going to the classroom which the arts stream students use."

Sorata declared, somewhat pleased with himself.

"Mashiro's in the arts classroom right now."

However, Chihiro promptly countered his trump card.

“So, where are you going? Are you going to the arts stream classroom for some reason or another despite that Mashiro isn’t there? Spit it out, where are you going?”

“...I’m going to the arts classroom.”

“Well then, get on your way.”

Chihiro immediately began heading in that direction.

“If you don’t catch up I’m just gonna leave you there, you know.”

“I’m just angry at you!”

Sorata could only pick up the easel and hurry after Chihiro. They went up the staircase heading up to the third floor. The two of them said nothing to each other along the way, and the only words spoken came from students saying hello to Chihiro as they passed by.

Chihiro would then immediately adapt her teacher-who-is-well-loved-by-students-and-extremely-capable persona, and reply cheerfully:

“Thanks, see you tomorrow.”

“Now that’s just plain scamming.”

“Did you say something?”

“It wouldn’t hurt to be nice to me once in a while.”

Chihiro looked at Sorata disgustedly.

"You're plain despicable."

"Now how could you say something like that to your students?"

"More like I'd only be saying that to you because you're my student? If I were to say that to some random passerby on the street, they'd get angry."

"But I'm angry!"

"I say, Kanda~ you're a really noisy one, don't you think you're attracting a bit too much attention? Give me a break."

"I should be the one saying that..."

She was being unbelievably unreasonable. Sorata couldn't resist the urge to let out a yawn.

As the two approached the corridor connecting the block they were currently in and the adjacent block, the amount of students in the hallways suddenly decreased, and the noise around them reduced significantly as well as no chatter from the students could be heard. The reason was because the other block was mainly used for the music stream and arts stream students to carry out their practical lessons, so normal students would not have very many opportunities to enter the place.

Just when they were about to enter the corridor, Chihiro said:

"I'm sorry."

"If you really think so, you could at least help out a little."

The easel was honestly very heavy for one person to carry.

“I’m not referring to that.”

Chihiro looked out the window while she spoke. Although she was clearly looking in that direction, she didn’t seem to be staring at anything in particular.

Her expression seemed worn and weary. It was then that Sorata understood what Chihiro’s apology truly meant.

“Sensei, you must have spoken out against the demolition of Sakurasou during the meeting, right?”

If there were no objections whatsoever, the decision would not have been made at such an awkward time of the year, it being the later half of February and all.

“You’re right, but I guess it was meaningless anyway since I wasn’t able to persuade them to change their minds.”

Chihiro smiled as if mocking her own foolishness. It was a mature expression, one that hardly appeared on a face of someone such as her.

“Thank you, Sensei.”

“...The board doesn’t have anything against you guys.”

Chihiro looked towards the baseball club whose members were currently carrying out activities on the school’s sports field. They placed down the tiles which signified the first to third bases onto the grass

before drawing a diamond-shaped outline around them, creating a makeshift playing field. From where Sorata and Chihiro were standing, the outline seemed rather lopsided.

“They don’t hate you.”

“Are you referring to the board?”

“Yeah, they just don’t know about you all and your values.”

“Ah.”

“As such, they believe in their own set of values and nothing more. They believe that Mashiro, who has world-renowned artistic talents should not be spending her time drawing manga; instead she should be immersing herself into the realm of fine arts, as they believe that this is the best possible path for Mashiro to take. The board has thought this through in great detail.”

“...”

“They’re genuinely concerned about Mashiro, as well as her future.”

Sorata had had those exact same thoughts in the past as well. Why would someone like Mashiro who was already famous for her talents want to start from scratch and attempt to make a name for herself as a manga artist...with all her capabilities, why didn’t she just choose to continue moving forward as a professional artist...

“But...”

To Mashiro, no one else’s opinions or values mattered. No matter how

much the board may worry about her, no matter what Sorata may think about her, she was loyal to herself and herself alone, and she would continue to move forward along the path she wanted to tread.

To draw the best and the most interesting manga – it would not be wrong to say that this was Mashiro's current and only goal, and she was ready to forfeit everything she had for the sake of pursuing it. Although she may have the petitioning activities to deal with as well, this one thing never changed, as she still maintained her usual routine of working on her storyboards and sketches until the wee hours of morning.

It was because of all this that her works were able to secure the spotlight on the cover of next month's issue of the magazine her publications were serialized in, as well as the colored splash pages.

"The reasons behind them classifying you and all the others at Sakurasou as problem students stem from the same set of values as well. The vast majority of people tend to label and discriminate those who are different from them, those so-called abnormal people, and they gain self-assurance from doing so."

"I'm not denying that we're problem students."

To tell the truth, it was impossible for Sorata to stay at the normal dormitories with the rest of the other students due to the fact that he adopted seven cats. Jin, the king of staying out, who always ignored curfew hours was no exception, while the alien Misaki was considered an abnormal individual even in Sakurasou. Ryuunosuke's room was filled with large amounts of computing devices, and as such it looked nothing like the room of a typical student. Although they weren't exactly an abnormal bunch, so to speak, Sorata had to admit that they

were at least slightly so.

“Well, it certainly isn’t a good thing that you all tend to cause trouble for others. But in my opinion, as abnormal as you lot may be, you guys do look more like typical high school students. Blending in with your surroundings, reading the mood of various situations... even something as simple as trying your best not to stand out would probably just make it harder not to in your case, huh?”

“Sensei...”

Sorata had no idea that Chihiro thought of him and the others in this manner.

However, it was also true that if she were unable to do so, she wouldn’t be the resident supervising teacher of Sakurasou. The reason why she allowed for a semi-liberal running of matters in Sakurasou was probably to allow for everyone there to fully utilize their talents and abilities. Although Sorata wished to clarify this, he remained silent instead, as he knew full well that Chihiro would just shrug it off and complain that it would be too troublesome of a question to answer.

“Well, we seem to have gone pretty far off topic. Where were we?”

“Please try to remember that yourself next time. Haven’t you laid off the booze already?”

“Now what’s that supposed to mean? Don’t tell me you remember?”

“You were saying that the board has nothing against us.”

“Ah, right. I wasn’t expecting you to have remembered, or were you

actually paying close attention?"

"Of course I was paying attention, you're a teacher!"

Chihiro ignored Sorata's protests and continued talking.

"I suppose Mitaka should've noticed by now. Regarding what I just said about the board's opinion."

"Jin-senpai, you say?"

"Attempting to discuss matters with people with differing values from your own is useless. It was exactly because of this that he chose this direct, honest method of carrying out petitioning activities, wasn't it? It's so uncharacteristic of you all, even."

"Um, I've never heard Jin-senpai mentioning anything about that..."

On that day... back when they had staged a meeting, Jin's expression as he sank deeply in thought surfaced in his mind. Was this what he was thinking about?

Sorata couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"Sigh."

"I say, looking at someone and sighing like that is rather rude, you know."

Considering the current situation, Chihiro's statement was probably ruder than that. Sorata resisted the urge to begin complaining, as if he were to say anything unnecessary the topic of conversation would begin

to drift once again.

“Do you think that I’ll be able to be like Jin-senpai in a year’s time?”

Although the two were only a year apart in terms of age, both Jin’s way of thinking and his actions were surprisingly mature.

“Something which requires as much ingenuity as having six girlfriends at once is impossible for the likes of you to learn.”

“I wasn’t planning to learn how to do that anyway!”

“You probably can’t even get one, can you?”

“Could you please not state the obvious? It’s painful!”

“Anyway, could you please leave that over at the arts classroom.”

Chihiro suddenly changed the subject and prepared to leave.

“Now wait just a minute, Sensei!”

“What is it? Pupil.”

Chihiro turned around, clearly annoyed as she was already leaving.

“Your ‘pupil’ is still having trouble coping with all these problems!”

“Oh, just deal with them on your own.”

“You’re too much!”

“Right then, you’re you and Mitaka’s Mitaka. Is that enough?”

Chihiro’s tone was flippant.

“That was clearly supposed to be motivating, but why does it sound so depressing coming from you!?”

“Fine, fine, if you really want me to help, I’ll tell you this.”

“I’m really begging you this time, so please?”

Chihiro defied Sorata’s sincere expectations and instead yawned as she replied.

“If you could just closely observe Mitaka’s good side, and set yourself a goal of becoming just like that within the next year, I suppose you should be fine. Based on this point alone, I think you should be perfectly fine for now.”

Sorata was rendered temporarily speechless at Chihiro’s sudden serious mannerisms.

“T-Thank you, Sensei.”

“You should be expressing your thanks more earnestly.”

“And that sentence just permanently destroyed any chances of me doing so.”

“Oh, right.” Chihiro uttered suddenly, as though she had just recalled something.

“Kanda, I just remembered that I have something to talk to you about.”

“Could you please stop changing the subject randomly?”

Although he had finally managed to get Chihiro where he wanted her, Chihiro wasn't the type of person who would revert to their original topic of conversation upon mild coercion. She uttered a name which threw Sorata off guard, momentarily scrambling his thoughts.

“Give me Fujisawa Kazuki's phone number.”

“What?”

“Come on, take out your phone.”

“Ah, right...”

Sorata propped the easel he was holding against the wall and pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“The number.”

Chihiro promptly ordered Sorata to read out the number to her. Sorata read out the digits one by one, whereby Chihiro pressed the corresponding number keys on her own mobile phone to take it down. She then called the number as soon as she typed in the last digit.

She pressed her phone against her ear, causing it to disappear within the folds of her long hair.

Chihiro took a deep breath as the dial tone began to ring.

The call went through at somewhere around the third ring.

“Hey, it’s me...um...it’s been a while.”

She spoke in a voice much warmer and cuter than her usual one.

“Huh? Who’re you calling a scammer!”

Just as Sorata thought she had actually undergone a momentous change, she instantly reverted back to her usual self.

“You’d think one could at least remember the voice of the girl you confessed to so long ago.”

Sadly, Sorata was unable to hear Kazuki’s reply.

“It’s nothing, really, but I need you to make some time for me today. Just this once.”

Sorata’s eyes met Chihiro’s, and she promptly gestured at him as one would gesture to a wild dog in order to chase it away, clearly intending for him to excuse himself first. He decided it would best to just listen to her for now – just as this thought crossed his mind, he happened to overhear their conversation.

“Huh? Kanda’s proposal? That thing’s not important.”

“That’s the most important thing in the world!”

Chihiro continued to gesture for him to leave.

Although he was interested in what the two were going to talk about, he

knew that the consequences would be dire if he were to remain where he was.

Sorata turned his back towards Chihiro, lifted up the easel and began walking down the corridor towards the arts classroom.

“Oh, just come already. If you miss this chance, you won’t ever get to hear me asking you out ever again.”

The last thing he heard was this fairly flirtatious line.

Part 3

Sorata left Chihiro behind him and proceeded to the arts classroom only to find that Mashiro was the only person left inside. In front of her was a gigantic canvas, so big that it could almost cover her whole body. Mashiro’s paintbrush nimbly danced about on it.

“Shiina.”

She didn’t react at all despite his persistent calls.

Faced with her stoic silence, Sorata instead decided to fold up the easel that he was told to bring to the classroom and sat down on a stool beside one of the windows.

He could see Mashiro’s face from where he was sitting, but not the contents of her drawing.

He noticed that she was especially focused today, what could she be drawing this time? Sorata, having had his curiosity piqued, snuck behind Mashiro to take a look.

“Ah.”

He let out a shocked cry as he saw what she had been working on.

He had seen Mashiro’s artworks countless times before then. Be it her illustrations or her manga...although indescribable feelings would assault him every single time he were to see them, this time he felt shocked for a completely different reason.

Mashiro was drawing a building he had seen before. A double-storied, old-fashioned, wooden apartment which he could clearly envision, down to the most minute of details even if he were to close his eyes.

It was a gentle work of art, and with the rays of the sun shining down upon it, it made him feel impossibly reminiscent. Although it was only halfway done with being colored, he felt a warm sensation bloom within his chest just by looking at it.

The sketch was taken from an outdoor perspective – the viewer would be looking directly at the building from the other side of the road, and all of its entirety was contained within the frame. Mashiro might have been looking at Sakurasou from outside the previous Sunday for this very reason.

Mashiro’s paintbrush energetically splashed across the areas of the painting that had yet to be colored. To the untrained eye, it would seem as if she were simply dabbing onto the canvas. As to why she used certain colors on certain areas, or why she added certain colors to other colors to achieve different effects, those things were outside Sorata’s knowledge of art. As he looked at the painting for a while longer, the Sakura trees which had yet to bloom were slowly beginning to do so

right before his eyes. Mashiro was making them bloom.

He felt goosebumps throughout his body, as well as the shock he felt every single time he laid his eyes upon one of Mashiro's paintings. Powerful works of art look just as amazing no matter how many times you look at them.

Sorata felt as if he would never, ever be able to get used to her talents.

He stared at the painting without uttering a single word, which was when he heard footsteps slowly approaching them from the direction of the hallway. They stopped right outside the classroom, and the door promptly opened, and someone stepped in.

Sorata's gaze met with that of the person who had just walked in. It was a familiar face.

"Ah."

As he said this, the other person looked at him, equally surprised.

It was Fukatani Shiho, one of the female students who had previously helped them with their petitioning activities. She wore her hair in its usual fashion, two gigantic ponytails swinging about like a pair of paintbrushes.

"Oh, um, I forgot to take something."

Shiho quickly said, as if she was just looking for an excuse to fill the rapidly growing silence between them.

"I see."

“Yep.”

She lifted up a painting from one of the easels that was located slightly further away from them. It depicted the scenery in the direction of the nearest bus stop from the top floor of the Suiko High school building, which Sorata recognized immediately. The painting itself seemed relaxed and carefree, with endless clear, blue skies serving as the backdrop.

“So, um, Kanda-san, are you here to get Mashiro-san?”

“Yep.”

They both looked over at Mashiro at the same time as he replied. She continued to focus on her painting, as she seemed to not have heard their conversation.

“Shiina-san’s amazing at this. When she gets in the zone, she won’t even be able to hear you if you try to talk to her.”

“Did you draw that, Fukatani-san?”

The topic of conversation promptly shifted over to Shiho.

“Yep, this is the final piece of coursework that we second-year students have to hand in.”

“Is that what Shiina’s working on right now?”

“Yeah.”

Sorata once again directed his gaze towards the painting in Shiho's hands.

"You're pretty good at this, huh."

"Actually, um, Kanda-san...I'm in the arts stream too."

"I'm sorry. You're very good at drawing."

"Sigh..."

Shiho sighed dejectedly.

"Forget it, ignore what I said. This happens all the time around Shiina-san."

"No, I honestly think you're good at drawing."

"I know, I know."

Sorata got the feeling that she didn't actually understand him. Although it was true that she was way out of Mashiro's league, from Sorata's perspective, Shiho's painting made him rather jealous of her as well. He wished that he could have the chance to draw paintings as filled with emotion as hers even once in his entire lifetime.

"Don't be surprised~ back in my hometown, I was praised to no end in art class by all sorts of people. 'This child's a genius!' They all said. I even managed to clinch lots of awards in various competition, and to top it all off I got a place in the renowned Suiko High, famous for its vicious competition among students."

“And you doubted me earlier when I said you were good.”

Shiho ignored him and continued:

“But, once I stepped into this place, every single other student could draw as well as I could, and some of them were even better than me. I kept thinking ‘Who the heck are these people?’, and it was all very tough for me initially. I had previously always believed that I had some sort of special talent nobody else did, and that shock made me feel as if my entire world was crumbling right beneath my feet.”

Sorata recalled what Rita had said to him before. The art school Rita’s grandfather had opened attracted students from all over the world, children who had each been hailed as artistic geniuses. But in this art school where each and every applicant knew how to draw, these former geniuses were reduced to mere mortals. Many of the children enrolled there refused to accept this harsh truth and chose to give up.

And yet, Mashiro still managed to stand out above the rest...

Similar things had occurred within the arts stream classes, which was why Sorata felt as if Mashiro was alone all the time. She was still drawing alone, wasn’t she? There was no right or wrong in the matter. Which was why Sorata decided to ask Shiho a question.

“Fukatani-san, do you hate Shiina?”

Sorata cut straight to the chase.

“Whoa, that was unexpectedly direct.”

Shiho was thrown off guard slightly by his question, but she quickly

regained her composure and replied, all the while looking at Mashiro:

“Well~ the first time I saw her I was all like ‘What the heck is this~’, her talents seemed as if they were in a whole other dimension than mine. I felt depressed, even, and I kept thinking thoughts like ‘Isn’t it meaningless for people like me to continue drawing?’ since people as good as her were already around. It’s not just me, too, every single other person in the class has felt this way before.”

That was no surprise. Because they had put in lots of effort into their drawing careers...because they each had their hopes and dreams painted onto their respective canvases, it was impossible for them to not feel anything when having their differences in skill cruelly displayed right before their eyes.

“What about now?”

“To be honest, I still feel the same way. She’s good, she’s simply too good! Shiina-san’s artworks are so good it’s completely ridiculous.”

“I see.”

Shiho could appreciate Mashiro’s talents more than Sorata could because they both expertized in the same field. Rita was no different.

“But, after being in the same class as her for about a year now, I began to realize that her talents have nothing to do with my drawing.”

Shiho spoke in a dramatic tone in an attempt to hide her embarrassment. This at the same time also meant that she still had some feelings which she simply couldn’t cut away from herself, but now she was able to slowly come to terms with them – it seemed that way. However, it was

not a problem that needed to be dealt with cleanly, as it was an unavoidable issue in careers where skill matters above all.

“The reason why I took up drawing in the first place was because I was interested in it, and it was also because I liked drawing that I applied for a place in Suiko. Although I let all the praise I got back at my hometown get to my head...all this allowed me to swallow my pride and move on, so I guess in a way that’s a good thing.”

“Why do you think so?”

“It’s nothing~ but, you know, people who go around like ‘I’m a genius!’ and are really self-confident and all would naturally be seen by the people around them as annoying or really horrible people, right? People won’t be able to stand them.”

Shiho lowered her voice slightly and spoke in a serious manner.

“That’s a possibility.”

“Although, of course, I still don’t really feel good about all this, I’ll just take it as motivation for me to work harder from now on.”

“It’s good to be optimistic.”

“Hah, more like headstrong. But I guess I feel lucky that I managed to get the chance to draw beside Shiina-san, and also the standard of our class’ artworks have increased exponentially over the past year. It must have been due to Shiina-san’s influence. We might as well get as much of the remaining glory as we can~, that’s what we thought. I guess we’re all surprisingly stubborn people.”

"Yeah."

Looking it from a realistic perspective, under these circumstances, it wouldn't be surprising for some students to crumble under the pressure. But at the same time, they were all high school students after all. They may not be adults, but they were not children either. Although Sorata wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not, he knew that everyone had to learn to come to terms with their problems sooner or later in their lives, and he might even be learning to do so right now. Also, he felt that having comrades in the same situation as him gave him the strength to keep moving forward. If he were in this alone, he definitely wouldn't be able to take it. Just like Rita...

"If you could continue being friends with Shiina like this, I would be really grateful."

"Am I really someone worthy of competing with her?"

"Since when did Shiina ever turn into such a fear-inducing presence..."

"She was like that from the very beginning. Also, it's like she would break at the slightest touch."

"It's true that she's rather strange...no, she's extremely strange, but it'll be fine."

When she had first arrived at Sakurasou, there were many unexpected issues that he had to deal with, but everything had cleared up as of now. Or it could be that Sorata had simply gotten used to all of it.

Either way, Mashiro wasn't someone who could be judged by her looks alone, as although she may not look the part, she was actually a strong

and stubborn person at heart. This had not changed at all throughout the past year.

“Say, Fukatani-san, can I ask you another question?”

“What is it?”

“Why did you choose to help out with our petitioning activities?”

Sorata thought that he would receive his answer immediately, but instead Shiho tilted her head sideways and said:

“I wonder?”

“...”

Sorata couldn't help but look at her somewhat rudely.

“Why're you looking at me like I'm some sort of idiot!”

“I'm sorry.”

“Actually, forget it...um~ if you really want me to say it, I guess I don't really have a definitive reason for doing it. I guess it was kind of a subconscious thing...or should I say it felt interesting, don't you think all this is just like a drama series? Carrying out all these petitioning activities just to save your home. Just thinking about the possibility that a situation like this could actually exist in real life piqued my interest.”

“I see.”

“Sorry, it makes me sound as if I helped you for no good reason.”

“Nah, you actually helped us out a lot with that casual decision of yours. If you had said something like ‘I was fully determined to help you all up to the very end’ it would be a little too heavy a pill for us to swallow. Also, if we had to live up to the expectations of every single other person who helped us out, we wouldn’t be able to get this far.”

“Ah, I see what you mean. But, if you really want me to tell you the biggest reason why I helped you all out, it may just have been because of how serious Mashiro looked when she was on her rounds. Yep, that’s definitely it. I stand on the side of the people who work hard to achieve their goals.”

“I see. On the side of the hardworking ones, huh.”

Her answer probably meant that she was the type of person who genuinely hoped that her hard work would be paid off somehow, but at the same time it also hinted that she would have no idea what to do if that were not the case. It was exactly because of that that he felt much in agreement with Shiho’s words. He understood what she meant – he understood it all too well.

“I just wish that the rest of us could be like that too.”

“Well then~ Kanda-san, could I ask you a question of my own?”

Shiho raised her hand energetically.

“Fine, fire away.”

Sorata figured that she would ask him something related to Sakurasou. Since she just said the whole matter seemed interesting. Right when he

was just beginning to feel relaxed, Shiho asked him an unexpected question.

“Are you in a relationship with Shiina-san?”

“...”

“...”

What exactly did Shiho just say? Sorata merely stood there and began to blink his eyes repeatedly while remaining completely silent.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite hear you. Could you repeat that?”

“Kanda-san, are you in a relationship with Shiina-san?”

It would seem that he had not misheard her question.

“What kind of question is that?”

“Well, since the two of you are always together, it became somewhat of a hot topic around school.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Really.”

Mashiro butted in all of a sudden.

“Don’t suddenly butt in like that! My heart almost skipped a beat there!”

"You're welcome."

"I don't seem to remember thanking you?"

"The two of you get along so well too."

Shiho seemed really happy all of a sudden.

"Which eye of yours did you use to see that we get along well, huh? Perhaps you should go for an eye checkup sometime soon."

"My eyesight's perfectly fine, thank you very much. 20/20 vision. Anyway back to the point, what's going on here? Are you two in a relationship or what?"

"That's up to you to decide."

Mashiro replied in an overly ambiguous manner before Sorata could do so.

"Now you just wait a second here, what kind of reply is that!?"

"If it's really up to me to decide, I think you guys have already progressed pretty far."

Shiho said something strange while twisting her body from left to right, even saying "What a tease~" as she did so.

"Don't you dare let your imagination run wild like that! There's nothing going on between me and Shiina."

As Sorata tried his best to deny her claims, he somehow felt pity for himself.

“Oh~ really now? I guess rumors can’t be trusted after all~”

“Right, right, if you’ve nothing else to do here then I suggest we should all be heading home.”

Besides, continuing this conversation would definitely prove to be detrimental to his mental health. Speaking of which, who was the one spreading all these weird rumors anyway...

Sorata looked over at Mashiro unconsciously only to realize that she was looking up at him as well.

He immediately averted his gaze, feeling awkward all of a sudden.

Shiho stared at the two of them without blinking. Sorata opened his mouth to say something to Mashiro, all the while looking as if he just wanted to get away from this whole situation.

“W-Well then, Shiina, let’s go help the rest with the petitioning activities.”

“Understood.”

Part 4

As Sorata and Mashiro who had just left the arts classroom parted ways with Shiho over at one of the stairwells, they proceeded along one of the corridors leading to the classrooms where normal lessons were held.

Along the way, Mashiro stopped suddenly as if she had just

remembered something, and she looked down at the netball court outside through one of the windows.

“What is it?”

“It’s Nanami.”

Sorata looked down as well, and immediately noticed Nanami’s presence. Her wavy ponytail was rather attention-grabbing, and the fact that she was the only one in uniform amongst everyone else in their PE uniforms made her even more noticeable.

She appeared to be trying to gather signatures from the students in the netball club before their activities started. Nanami hurriedly began to explain the situation to about all thirty members of the club as their captain gathered them to listen to what she had to say.

“Nanami’s working hard.”

“We should be doing that too, then.”

They had collected nowhere near enough signatures.

“Ah, I spot a Kouhai-kun!”

Just as they heard this, they heard footsteps approaching them as well. They didn’t even need to turn to look to know who it was. Within the entire known universe, the only person who would ever call Sorata “Kouhai-kun” was Misaki.

Misaki promptly charged at them while uttering a battle cry of sorts: “Yeah!” after which she proceeded to direct her outstretched palm

towards Sorata's forehead, making a crisp slapping sound as the blow connected. It was no different from being smacked by a sumo wrestler.

She was not the only one present, however, as Jin soon caught up to her. There were others as well, including the former student council president Tatebayashi Souichiro and his girlfriend Hauhau, also known as Himemiya Saori.

"Yo."

Jin casually raised a hand in greeting.

"Why are the former student council president and Himemiya-senpai here too?"

The third-year students could, by right, choose not to come to school. Aside from Monday where they had their general assemblies, if they didn't have anything important to do on the school grounds, they could just choose to not come. Jin and Misaki were here for the petitioning activities, so it was at least reasonable to see them there.

"I came to discuss the contents of the valedictorian speech for the graduation ceremony with one of the teachers."

"That's actually just an excuse for him to go on a date with Hauhau."

Jin immediately whispered to Sorata just as Souichiro finished speaking.

"I heard that, Mitaka!"

"That's because you were supposed to."

"I should really find some time to discuss that horrible attitude of yours with you."

"Wanna talk throughout the night and go get some coffee the morning after?"

"Just as I mentioned your attitude, jeez..."

Sorata decided to ignore those two for now, as he had seen them bicker like this countless times before anyway, he was used to it.

He then looked in the direction of Saori, who said:

"I'm here for orchestra practice."

She was hugging a violin case. By Suiko's tradition, on the day of the graduation ceremony the graduation songs would be performed by the music stream students from all three years...about thirty of them would be selected from the school orchestra.

"What'cha looking at, Mashiron?"

Misaki dashed over to where Mashiro was standing and pressed her face against the window.

"It's Nanami."

"Let me see~ I see Nanamin! I'll go help out as well then~"

Misaki promptly dashed off. She headed in the direction of the staircase slightly in front of them, and quickly disappeared down it.

“She really can’t sit still at all, huh.”

Souichiro smiled blankly.

“Misaki’s back to her usual self at last.”

Saori seemed rather happy at this, and she began to nod her head in approval.

“Which means, that wedding ring you bought her must have served its purpose well, huh?”

Souichiro looked pointedly over at Jin. Revenge for what he said earlier.

“Hmm? What’s that you say?”

Jin began to play dumb.

“Don’t try to mess with me. Kamiigusa took it out and bragged about it to me for the longest time.”

“She did that to me too. It must have been for almost three hours.”

“I see, sorry to make trouble for you both.”

That may be true, but was it really alright for him to ignore the fact that he had effectively ‘proposed’ to her? Well, he wasn’t completely denying it...

“Well then, you should at least have become a half-decent person by now.”

Souichiro nodded in a satisfied manner.

“A ring...seems nice.”

Saori muttered to herself.

Everyone present immediately shifted their gazes towards Saori.

“W-What is it?”

She proceeded to panic as she realized that everyone had fixed their sights on her. What she had said earlier appeared to have been an unconscious comment.

“Even she said it too, Your Honor the Former Student Council President.”

Jin smiled evilly at Souichiro while placing a hand on his shoulder. The former student council president in question was now blushing furiously. That comment of hers alone had reversed the entire situation.

“That’s her wish, isn’t it. Don’t you want to give her a ring as a present?”

“H-How did you know?”

Saori jumped back in shock.

“You said it yourself just now, Senpai. You said it ‘seemed nice’.

Sorata broke the news to her as she simply looked too pitiful to ignore.

“Huh? Really!?”

Saori looked over at the most trustworthy person present for proof. Which was of course Souichiro. He nodded faintly, still blushing as he did so. In the next instant, Saori's cheeks began to redden as well.

"T-That's not what I meant! Really!"



She began to defend herself.

“I-it’s not like I was trying to coerce him to do it or anything.”

“So, Hauhau, you don’t want Souichiro to give you a ring?”

Jin took his chance and began to tease her.

“I-I just said I don’t want him to! W-Well to tell the truth I really do want one from him, but that’s just...no, what am I saying! A proposal isn’t all that important, and I’m not such a serious woman who would think too much about that sort of thing, it’s just that I feel...you know...ANYWAY YOU’RE MISTAKEN, ALRIGHT!”

“I understand.”

“R-Really?”

“A maiden’s yearnings, that’s what all this is right? I never thought you were such a girl at heart, Hauhau.”

Saori’s normal appearance may be mature, but she seemed all too much like a cute little girl while being teased by Jin.

“Since you already know what I meant, just stop picking on me already!”

“Now that I can’t do.”

“Why not?”

“Because Hauhau just looks too cute when she’s flustered.”

“T-That’s enough! I have rehearsals to attend. I’m leaving.”

Saori ran off in a hurry. Souichiro glared at Jin, then followed after her.

Jin stopped him just as he did so.

“Wait a sec, Prez.”

“What now?”

Souichiro turned around, visibly annoyed at this whole situation.

“As for that favor I asked of you, I’ll be counting on you.”

Souichiro’s expression hardened significantly as he heard this.

“I understand.”

What were they talking about?

“Senpai, what did you ask him to do for you?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, just a little something on the graduation ceremony.”

“Oh.”

Jin was obviously avoiding the subject, so Sorata decided not to force the answer out from him.

Souichiro caught up with Saori, and the two headed off into the distance. The two of them were passionately complaining about Jin.

“Those two really are a perfect match for each other~”

Jin remarked cheekily as he watched the two of them walk off. He really was a terrible person.

Sorata and the others could no longer sit around lazily like this.

“Shiina, we should be heading off to carry out our activities now...”

Sorata attempted to get Mashiro to leave, but she was still looking down at the netball court through the window.

“Did you see something interesting?”

“Misaki’s there too.”

“Oh, let me have a look.”

He noticed that there appeared to be a bear on the netball court. To be precise, it was a stuffed bear costume, and he knew at once who was inside it. It was definitely Misaki. Where the heck did she even change into it? She was in her uniform just now too...

Misaki was running cheerfully about the netball court while in the stuffed bear costume. The thirty-member strong netball team ran about as well, as they appeared to be playing some form of tag.

The club members who Misaki caught up to were promptly immobilized and collapsed onto the field, not all too surprisingly as after all they had been attacked by a person in a bear costume. The body count grew slowly but steadily.

“Phew~ now that looks like hell on earth.”

How was she even moving so fast while in that massive costume? She could even easily catch up to members of an athletic club. The alien truly did live up to its name. Weak humans like the rest of them could only wait helplessly to be hunted down, and they were already visibly beginning to panic.

Should they step in?

“Jin-senpai, what should we do about that?”

Sorata moved up beside Jin to ask.

“Let’s just pretend as if we didn’t see anything.”

“How could you even do such a thing!?”

Just as Sorata cried out, someone pinned down the rampaging bear, as if the heavens had finally heard his prayers. That person had a ponytail sticking out of the back of her head. It was Nanami.

Misaki was led by the neck to the corner of the netball field where she was forced to kneel down. Although they couldn’t hear what exactly was going on, they knew that she was probably receiving a scolding from Nanami.

“What just happened?”

“Well, that did.”

What a simplistic reply.

“Anyway, Jin-senpai.”

“Hmm?”

“Have you and Misaki-senpai talked about what you both are going to do in the future?”

Jin would be heading to Osaka after him and Misaki both graduated. Jin should have already promised that he would reunite with her in future after he finished university on the day that they all found out Sakurasou was going to be demolished.

“Well, I’m not saying that I don’t want to, but just look at her...”

Misaki had taken the opportunity to reverse the situation while Nanami was distracted, and in the next instant Nanami was the one being held hostage by the bear. Looking closely, the two of them seemed to be having some sort of conversation. Nanami ended up getting into one of the costumes as well.

“Now that’s an unexpected development.”

“Since Aoyama-san actually got into one of those things, it would be safe to assume that she forced Misaki to stop hunting in return.”

Jin said disinterestedly.

Nanami had finished changing into her costume. It was a tiger one.

Misaki immediately resumed her hunt. The netball club members who had just let down their guards instantly began to run for their lives once

more, just like a group of goats attempting to run from their ferocious prey.

Nanami began to chase Misaki once again, grumbling in frustration as she did so. However, she was no longer able to catch up to her. This new garb of hers severely limited her mobility.

“Can’t she just take it off...”

“I’m guessing that she probably can’t reach the zipper on the back.”

“Oh, right.”

Sorata recalled that Mashiro had asked him to unzip the zipper for her last time when she was wearing a cat-shaped costume. Nanami had tried to do it herself by reaching around to the back, but all she succeeded in doing was wriggling about in a cute fashion.

“Sorata.”

He turned around only to see Mashiro staring up at him with an unnaturally solemn expression on her face.

“What is it this time?”

“Nanami’s acting strange.”

“Of course she is. She’s a tiger now.”

“Nanami’s incredibly energetic.”

“Huh? Oh...”

Sorata mumbled to himself: “So that’s what she was referring to...” before shooting a glance at Jin out of the corner of his eye. After all, Nanami had told him not to say anything to him or Misaki.

“She probably told you to keep quiet about it, but don’t worry about that.”

“Jin-senpai?”

“Aoyama-san was acting suspiciously cheerful last night all of a sudden, while you were sitting around looking like you had a really bad stomachache. Doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together.”

Sorata realized he was being teased.

Since Jin knew about it anyway, he figured there was no point trying to hide it any longer.

“Now, Aoyama’s just toughing it out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Over these past two years...only becoming a voice actor meant anything to Aoyama. She had ran away from home all the way from Osaka to here to pursue this dream, even working all those part-time jobs to support herself...all the things she did were so that she could achieve her goal.”

“Mm, Nanami worked very hard.”

“But after failing her auditions, she should, by right, feel a lot like crying

right now. She definitely shouldn't be getting herself involved in the petitioning activities..."

"..."

"However, since Sakurasou's potentially going to be demolished, and you and Misaki-senpai are going to graduate, Nanami's not allowing herself to cry so that both of you won't worry about her."

The fact that Mashiro was the reason why Sakurasou was going to be demolished was also a contributing factor. Nanami had mentioned it the previous day as well that she wouldn't let Mashiro blame herself for it.

"..."

Mashiro didn't avert her gaze from Sorata the whole time.

"It would've been much better if she had just cried her heart out yesterday when she received the notice. I think I really messed up back then with what I told her."

His emotions began to stir up once more because of what he had said.

"Sorata."

"I don't care if she would have hated me, I should have just made her cry and ignored her intentions to try and act tough."

"..."

Even though he had realized all these things, it was already too late...Sorata felt his annoyance at himself begin to rise. The fiery feelings

of regret brewing in the pits of his stomach surged upwards all at once, no longer under his control.

"I...I turned a blind eye."

"..."

"What with my proposal and the Sakurasou affair, I already had too many things on my plate to handle."

Mashiro being the cause of the matter was another pressuring detail.

"My head was already at the brink of collapsing under the stress, so although I knew that Nanami wasn't fine at all even as she claimed she was, I didn't bother pursuing the matter and turned away from the issue instead...I must have thought that I couldn't take it any longer, and so I unwittingly used Nanami's stubbornness to my own advantage...EVEN THOUGH I KNEW THAT WAS SOMETHING I ABSOLUTELY COULDN'T DO!"

Sorata's tone grew increasingly violent as he let his emotions take hold of him.

"It's nothing."

Jin's voice casually dismissed all of his concerns.

"How could this be nothing?"

"Aoyama-san decided herself what to do, didn't she? You were just respecting her decision."

“No. I chose to ignore her while she was in the midst of her own struggle for my own benefit.”

It was already too late. All that he was doing was crying over spilt milk.

“If you feel so plagued by guilt over your decision, doesn’t that mean all Aoyama-san did thus far was meaningless?”

“Even so, I shouldn’t have let her endure all this. Because it’s impossible for her to do so!”

“Yeah.”

Jin looked up at the distant skies.

“Aoyama-san herself knows this more than anyone else.”

“Huh?”

Sorata felt shocked by this obvious fact.

“Emotions such as these cannot be repressed by natural means, so obviously she forced herself to do so. Aoyama-san herself knew this, of course, she knows this more than anyone of us here. Is that really a surprise? She’s the one caught up in all this, she’s the one suffering. But, now Aoyama-san wants to act cheerful for the sake of Sakurasou, and for the sake of me and Misaki since we’re about to graduate. You can’t do something like this without a certain level of determination. Since she’s already come this far, there’s no such thing as right or wrong, nor good nor bad. What she **SHOULD** be doing doesn’t matter any longer, all that matters is what she **FEELS** like doing.”

“That...that’s true.”

It has nothing to do with whether it’s right or wrong, it’s just something they wanted to do. Sorata had told Ryuunosuke that as well. It was because of that that Jin’s words pierced him all the more painfully. Despite this, Sorata still wanted to save Nanami. Although he knew that his actions and thoughts were conflicting...it didn’t matter to him anymore.

“You, as an outsider, are trying to advise and convert her, to tamper with her feelings, the decisions she’s already made, don’t you think that’s pretty twisted as well?”

“So you’re saying that even if I know it’s wrong, even if I know all this is just going to make Aoyama suffer even more, I should just leave her alone!?”

“Yes.”

Jin said, bluntly.

“How could I possibly do that!”

“Although it’s just my own theory...I believe that Aoyama-san had made up her mind to do something like this before she even received her results.”

“What do you mean?”

Jin placed his hands on the windowpane and looked down at the netball court below them.

“Although I don’t know whether she decided to do it because of the Board’s decision to demolish Sakurasou or because she took into consideration that Misaki and I are going to graduate soon, she put two years’ worth of effort into these auditions, didn’t she? She even managed to hold back her emotions and continue forward even after failing them, do you think you could pull something like that off, Sorata?”

“...”

He couldn’t do it. How could he? Sorata had known the answer to this question even before Jin had said it. Hell, he was even more affected than Nanami when they found out she had failed.

“I won’t call this a definite answer, but I don’t think I’d be able to do it. I would want to just throw everything behind me right then and there.”

“Me too.”

Just as the words escaped his mouth, Sorata suddenly felt as if he was able to understand Jin’s words.

Although Nanami had not said a single thing with regards to it, she had probably been thinking about it with every passing day. About the results of her auditions – if she were to pass, and also if she were to fail...at first, these were her problems and hers alone. But at the same time, the problem of Sakurasou’s impending demolition arose, with the reason for it being Mashiro herself...Nanami took these as her own problems as well, and she had worried about them along with Sorata. They worried about Sakurasou...about Mashiro...and since Sorata himself took enjoyment in this, he ignored the feelings Nanami had sacrificed for their sakes.

It was only now...it was only now that he wished Nanami had put herself first and only cared about her own problems. He honestly wished that she could have spared some thought for herself.

"As long as you don't run away from the thought that you might have did the wrong thing, you'll be fine."

"No, I won't."

"Also, if she really can't go on any further, please give Aoyama-san your support."

Sorata didn't think that doing that would be sufficient to redeem Nanami.

"It's true that this might be taking the long way round, in a sense, but there'll come a time when you'll realize that you did nothing wrong."

"Jin-senpai."

"Taking the long route is fine too, since you get to look at all the things life has to offer."

Jin said while smiling.

"Also, letting Aoyama tough it out isn't a problem you have to face on your own. Misaki and I have some responsibility in it too."

"That's not it!"

"Are you trying to say that it can't be helped that I'm graduating? But,

the demolition of Sakurasou affects me as well. So, we should be working as hard as we can until it's all over. If we lose Sakurasou as well, then we really won't be able to help Aoyama-san."

Jin looked at Sorata as he said this, and he smiled once again. It was a slightly repressed smile, different from all the smiles he had smiled before. Then again, it was no surprise. He had probably struggled with himself for a long time before being able to say those words.

He had so many things he wanted to say, and so many things that he still simply couldn't accept. But, what Jin had said was true. If Sakurasou were to disappear, everything would truly be destroyed.

Now they could only continue with their petitioning activities, and not give up until the very end. In order to protect the place where they all shared, they had to work hard for each other's sakes. In order to reciprocate these feelings, Sorata had no other choice but to continue onward.

"Well then, I'll be heading off first."

"Alright."

Jin hopped swiftly down the stairs. He was probably heading towards the netball court to get Misaki. They had already planned to collect signatures from the members of the volleyball club and the basketball club who were practicing over at the indoor sports hall.

"It's all my fault."

"Shiina?"

“It’s my fault that Nanami’s being so energetic.”

“That’s not true.”

“It’s because of me that Sakurasou’s going to disappear, isn’t it?”

Mashiro looked up at Sorata with her clear, translucent eyes.

Sorata figured lying to her would be meaningless. Mashiro wasn’t trying to get at that specific problem.

“I’m going to apologize to Nanami.”

“Aoyama doesn’t want her to apologize to you.”

“Then, what should I do?”

Mashiro’s gaze wavered slightly.

“Tell me, what exactly should I do?”

They wavered due to her uncertainty.

“Tell me, Sorata.”

Sorata felt Mashiro’s sadness and fear being swept towards him along with the wind, and he bit his lip to endure it.

“It really hurts here...”

Mashiro slowly clenched the hand she held over her chest.

“Shiina.”

“I thought it would stop hurting come morning.”

Sorata felt his chest twinge in pain as well.

“It didn’t.”

The pain in his heart began to weigh down upon him.

“Me too.”

“Sorata?”

She looked up at him with those mystifying yet tiny eyes of hers.

“My chest feels terrible, it hurts...it hurts so much that I don’t think I can take it much longer. I think Aoyama feels the same way as well.”

“I want to do something for her.”

“Me too.”

If this problem could be resolved by simply offering his body, Sorata would gladly do so.

“I feel like I must do something.”

“ ... ”

However, no matter how much he prayed, he knew there couldn’t possibly be such a miraculous way to resolve the matter. Reality was

hardly so kind.

“My forehead hurts too.”

“I’m sorry! I’m hurting as well! But even if it hurts, the only thing we can do is to continue collecting signatures.”

“Mm.”

Just as Jin had said, if their whole plan were to fail, they wouldn’t be able to redeem Nanami, nor would they be able to save Mashiro.

They had only one way out of this situation.

“The only thing we can do is to collect more signatures.”

Sorata felt almost as if he was talking to himself.

Part 5

They had nowhere near enough time. Another day passed within the blink of an eye.

Classes that Sorata felt should have been boring shot past in an instant.

It was the third day of yet another week, March the 2nd, a Wednesday. They had less than a week until the graduation ceremony.

During lunch break, Sorata, Mashiro, Nanami, Misaki and Jin gathered in the cooking classroom used in home economics lessons. Portable cookers and frying pans of all sorts were laid out in front of the five of them, each and every one rumbling steadily and emitting deliciously

pleasant fragrances.

They were eating lunch.

In order to gather signatures from students who usually reached school earlier than the others as well, they would begin their petitioning activities as early as when the morning exercises began, and thus they were left with not enough time to prepare lunchboxes for themselves every morning.

And so, they reached a conclusion during one of their meetings that –

“We can’t fight a war on an empty stomach, so we might as well decide who’ll be preparing lunchboxes for us.”

“I think Misaki can do it. Since we third-year students can come to and fro from school as we please, and we don’t have lessons anymore.”

“Alright then! Jin and I will handle it!”

Thus, it was decided that their afternoon meals would be taken care of by Jin and Misaki.

They began carrying out their tasks on the very next day after the decision was made. On the first day of this operation, the two third-year students returned to Sakurasou after they finished with their morning petitioning activities to make lunchboxes for all of them, then delivered them to school. However, they realized that this method was simply too inefficient, and so they decided that they would meet at the cooking classroom instead. Which landed them in their current situation.

On the previous day, they had curry, spaghetti, some hamburger steaks

and takeout from the local soba noodles store.

“Misaki-senpai, why does everyone each have a bowl of cold soba AND a bowl of soba with noodle soup?”

“I just felt like eating soba noodle soup with some cold soba as a side dish today!”

“Never since the day of my birth have I ever even entertained the idea of doing something like that! And I most likely won’t in future too!”

“Ah, Kouhai-kun, don’t tell me you’re planning to eat cold soba with some soba noodle soup as a side dish instead? Done like a true connoisseur!”

“What kind of standards do you have!?”

“Kanda-san, ignoring this for now, shouldn’t we instead be commenting on the fact that we got takeout from a noodle place while still at school?”

“Let’s get a pizza tomorrow.”

Jin had said nonchalantly as he munched on a combination of croquettes and soba noodles with curry, somehow able to ignore Nanami’s scathing remark.

“Sorata.”

“What is it?”

“The soba noodles taste good.”

“Well, good for you then!”

However, in the end they decided on having hotpot instead of pizza.

Nanami, who had initially objected to the whole affair had since given up on trying, and she was now ladling condiments into the soup with a disinterested look on her face. Before long, her expression brightened up, presumably because she had found what she was looking for.

However, this did not last for long, as Misaki, who was sitting beside her promptly snatched away the scallop in Nanami’s bowl deftly with her chopsticks.

“Ah, Kamiigusa-senpai!”

It was already too late. Misaki gobbled down the meat inside in an instant.

“Don’t get careless, Aoyama. You of all people should know by now that when eating hotpot at Sakurasou, the only safe place for your food is inside your own mouth. Leaving your food on your plate is pretty much akin to it being in the pot.”

“...Right.”

Nanami stared at the hotpot, feeling discontented at her loss. Was she looking for another one? Sadly, there were none. Misaki had polished off an entire pile of them earlier, so there was a possibility that they had already went extinct.

It was then that another pair of chopsticks dropped a scallop into Nanami’s bowl.

To the surprise of everyone present, this Good Samaritan turned out to be Mashiro.

“Mashiro?”

“For you.”

“Oh, um, thanks...wait! It’s fine! Really!”

Nanami prepared to return the scallop, having finally realized what exactly was going on. However, she pursed her lips in hesitation instead just as she was about to do so, presumably because using chopsticks to perform the act wouldn’t be too appropriate.

Misaki, on the other hand, was staring at the scallop with a greedy look on her face.

“Aoyama, Misaki-senpai’s got her eye on that.”

“Eat up.”

Under Mashiro’s coercing, Nanami popped the scallop into her mouth, not letting her guard down even for a second for fear of Misaki pulling any sudden moves.

“Is it good?”

Mashiro was staring at Nanami throughout.

“Mm, it’s very good.”

“What else would you like?”

“Huh?”

“Nanami, what else would you like?”

Nanami looked over at Misaki. She was gobbling down a large piece of codfish with a blissful look on her face.

“I’ll take the codfish then.”

“Sorata, get some for me.”

“Why am I the one doing this!?”

“Oh, and maybe some vermicelli.”

“Sorata, get some noodles too.”

“Fine, fine.”

Sorata reluctantly grabbed a ladle and began to sift through the contents of the hotpot. Was there any codfish left at all? Misaki had eaten a lot of the stuff already, as it was after all a very popular hotpot condiment. Sorata had gotten nothing but cabbages or Shiitake mushrooms since earlier, not to mention tons of vermicelli noodles. He ventured deeper into the pot, finally feeling as if he had got something good.

“Wow, there really is more left.”

In his ladle were a few pieces of codfish.

“Here.”

Sorata poured the vermicelli noodles and codfish into Nanami’s bowl.

“Thanks.”

Nanami began to eat, still wary of Misaki. She then realized that someone was watching her, and so she closed her mouth and put the piece of codfish back in her plate.

Mashiro was staring straight at Nanami.

“I really can’t eat properly with someone staring at me like that.”

“Sorata, don’t look.”

“Aoyama’s talking about you!”

“I was actually referring to you as well, Kanda-san.”

“See?”

Mashiro said smugly.

Nanami quickly took this opportunity to gobble down the piece of codfish and slurp up the vermicelli noodles.

“Aoyama, does it taste good?”

“Mm, the vermicelli is excellent.”

“Why would you talk about that of all things!?”

“Well, a hotpot isn’t a hotpot without vermicelli. Of course, the codfish is good too.”

Nanami chewed slowly, savoring the taste of the food.

The corners of Mashiro’s mouth turned up slightly in a small smile, presumably one of relief.

Throughout the past week, Sorata had seen that expression on Mashiro’s face countless times. Each time she did that it had something to do with Nanami. Mashiro would initiate conversations with Nanami a lot recently, however it would always happen right out of the blue, catching her off guard...just like what had happened yesterday, when she suddenly appeared at Sorata and Nanami’s classroom without warning:

“For you.”

She passed Nanami some cakes and returned to her own classroom.

Sorata and Nanami were of course rather confused by her actions.

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

“Who knows?”

Actually, Sorata had a feeling he knew why. Mashiro was concerned about Nanami, since she was being too energetic, too cheerful. Mashiro must have had sensed that something was off as well, that all this was her fault somehow.

While Sorata was in the midst of thought, Mashiro suddenly stood up.

“Is something wrong?”

“I’m going to the toilet.”

“Ah, go quickly then.” (TL note: In Japanese, ‘toilet’ and ‘go quickly’ sound similar, it’s a commonly used – but lame – joke)

A tiny blizzard formed around Sorata as he said this. Nanami glared at him coldly, in a provocative manner that he somehow felt as if he could get used to.

Sorata hurriedly called out to Mashiro in a frantic attempt to divert everyone’s attention from his words:

“Don’t get lost, now.”

The area around the cooking classroom was not commonly ventured into by students during normal lessons, so that was in fact a worrying possibility.

Mashiro turned around, poking only her head through the doorway like some sort of wild animal.

“What did you say?”

“Could you at least have some self-consciousness?”

“It’s fine.”

“You know something’s been bothering me all this time, where do you get your absurd amounts of self-confidence from? I need some too!”

“If I get lost, I’ll just cry out your name as loudly as I can.”

“Don’t you dare do that! Weird rumors will spread!”

He was painfully reminded of Fukatani Shiho questioning him whether he and Mashiro were in a relationship just the day before.

“Isn’t Mashiro acting a little a strange?”

“That’s no surprise. After all, Sakurasou’s about to be demolished, and she knows that she’s the reason why.”

Not to mention that Nanami was going through a lot as well...hence, Mashiro wanted to encourage her in her own way, which was, of course, reasonable.

Although Nanami herself had not yet come to terms with the situation, she didn’t mention anything about Mashiro since they had found out about her involvement in the issue.

They had essentially finished up the hotpot, and so Jin stepped in to make some congee with the remaining ingredients. Sorata stared blankly at him as he did so, until his phone suddenly rang.

He had received a text message.

He opened it up, only to see that the subject heading was...

- Sorata’s gone.

“So she did get lost after all!”

Jin added some eggs into the already-boiling congee. Although attracted by its wafting scent, Sorata fought back the urge to stay and dashed into the corridor.

He spotted Mashiro almost immediately.

She was standing in front of the door of the classroom two rooms ahead of them.

“Shiina.”

Mashiro noticed Sorata immediately as he called out to her, and she began to approach him slowly. He noticed that her cheeks were puffed up in dissatisfaction with something.

“Don’t walk around by yourself.”

“Says you!”

By the time Sorata and Mashiro returned to the cooking classroom, the congee was already done cooking. Jin poured portions of it into a few bowls, which he then distributed amongst everyone.

Jin ate while looking at something.

It was the notebook they used for collecting signatures.

He bit his lower lip, evidently contemplating something.

“This is anything but reassuring.”

“I think it’s pretty good.” (TL note: “Anything but reassuring” and “bad-tasting” sounds the same in Japanese.)

“No one’s talking about the congee.”

“I am.”

“I thought so.”

“If we can’t get fifty more signatures this week, it’ll be very difficult for us to keep up this consistency on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and next Monday. We have to think of some way to deal with this.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

They had gotten a lot of signatures last weekend. Now, the students who were interested in helping out had already did their part, which of course made their job even more difficult as they were only left with the students who were not.

The five of them continued to brainstorm until the end of lunch break, but no one had any good ideas to contribute.

“I’ll think about it before school ends.”

Sorata said. Anyway, their brief meeting was over.

Part 6

Sorata continued to think of ways to get more signatures throughout the fifth and sixth periods. However, they had done most of the things they could think of already, such as visiting every single class, performing in

animal suits, visiting each one of the clubs and societies, and so on. Trying to think of another method was proving to be difficult.

In the end, he was unable to think of anything before school ended.

After homeroom ended, Mashiro went over to his classroom.

“Sorata, let’s work hard today as well.

He and Mashiro then proceeded to visit every single first-year classroom. Although some of the students seemed curious and interested at first, there were still quite a number of them who left right after taking one look at Sorata and Mashiro’s faces, as if they were telling them “I know what you’re going to do, so leave me out of it”.

Sorata’s words didn’t have the power to stop them from leaving. This intense feeling of helplessness nearly made him give up entirely, on a few occasions at that.

“Please help us with our petitioning activities.”

However, every time he saw Mashiro beside him saying these very words, Sorata would feel a surge of renewed confidence.

Mashiro maintained an earnest attitude throughout, causing Sorata to feel chilled by her very presence, as her expression and tone of voice differed not a fraction from her usual ones. When they carried out petitioning activities, she seemed even more like an illusion, a mirage, just like an ice sculpture or a glass statue...

“Right now, Sakurasou is facing the threat of being demolished. Please lend us your strength, everyone.”

“Please help us out.”

Mashiro quickly bowed and continued.

After they finished explaining the circumstances of their plight, two female students agreed to help out. Sorata felt as if he had seen them from somewhere, until he realized that the two of them once gave him their thoughts about the game all the Sakurasou residents had produced during the cultural festival, Nyanboron.

The two female students then left the classroom, not before wishing them good luck. It appeared as if they had some club activities.

As Sorata and Mashiro prepared to move on to the next class, a male student approached them.

“Are you willing to help us out?”

Sorata asked the male student, who seemed at a loss for words.

“Ah, no, about that...regarding your petition, do I have to sign here too?”

“Here?”

What was he talking about?

“I’ve already signed the notebook in the computer classroom.”

“Computer classroom?”

Sorata still had no idea what he was talking about.

The first-year student cowered in unease as he saw Sorata's brow furrow.

It was then that Nanami dashed into the classroom.

"Oh, so you're here! Kanda-san, listen up!"

She seemed terribly flustered, with drops of sweat trickling down her forehead.

"Did something happen?"

"I heard some first-years from the basketball club mentioned that someone placed a notebook in the computer classroom for petitioning purposes."

Sorata and Mashiro exchanged a quick glance.

"We were just told of this as well."

Sorata once again looked towards the first-year student who had struck up a conversation with them. His face had already frozen with nervousness, as everyone's eyes were focused on him.

"Could you please explain what you just said, in detail?"

"Well, it's nothing, um, just that...isn't there a notebook over at the computer classroom for petitioning purposes? I found out about it through the website."

"Website?"

Sorata and Nanami now had another query to add to their list. Even Mashiro looked mildly confused.

“There’s a page on the school website that has information regarding your petitioning activities, and so I read it. The link to it was attached directly to the homepage of our school’s website.”

Neither Sorata, Mashiro nor Nanami could remember ever doing something like that.

“We should go check it out first.”

Mashiro and Nanami both nodded.

“Thanks a lot.”

“Ah, no need, it’s fine.”

Sorata and crew thanked him and immediately sped off towards the computer classroom.

They passed by the audiovisual classroom, meaning that the computer and information network classroom – known to the students as the computer classroom was just ahead. (check the terminologies pls)

They opened the door to find forty neatly arranged computers waiting for them.

A few familiar faces were sitting at the front-most seats.

Namely, Jin and Misaki.

“Eh? Why are the two of you here?”

“I see that you all must’ve heard about the notebook placed here as well.”

Jin said after taking a look at Sorata’s expression.

Sorata nodded silently. That was enough to serve as an explanation.

“So, the notebook?”

Nanami was already searching around the classroom for it.

“It’s right here.”

Jin was holding onto it.

“Catch.”

He threw it casually in Sorata’s direction. Sorata caught it and immediately began to flip through its pages.

Mashiro and Nanami stretched their necks slightly over his shoulders to get a glance as well.

“Huh?”

Sorata was the first to cry out in surprise.

“It can’t be?”

Nanami proceeded to use her hand to cover her mouth in shock.

“So many names.”

Mashiro mumbled.

No doubt about it.

The entire first half of the pages of the notebook were filled up with names.

As to how astonishingly large the amount of signatures written there was, Sorata and the others knew all too well.

The amount of names written in the notebook was just about equal to the amount of signatures Sorata and the others had gathered in the span of the previous ten days.

“There’s this one too, Kouhai-kun!”

Misaki waved a hand at Sorata, having already adopted a stance before one of the computers.

A webpage was displayed on its monitor, which explained the current circumstances Sakurasou was in using slightly large fonts with numerous photos attached. Those photos depicted the conditions within the building itself, clearly illustrating that although the building was ancient, it was not in such a decrepit state that it needed to be demolished immediately.

The current residents of the dormitory include two third-year students as well as four second-year students. The website also stated that they wished that for just one more year...until the current second-year students graduated, that Sakurasou could remain.

Lastly, it ended off with a plead for signatures to assist their petitioning activities.

There was only one person who could pull something like that off. A current resident of Sakurasou who was not with them at this moment...

“Did Akasaka do this?”

There was almost no doubt about it.

“But, how could he possibly have gathered so many signatures?”

Nanami once again looked down at the notebook to confirm what she had saw, still unable to believe her eyes.

Jin then replied:

“I can imagine that there are definitely quite a number of students who would be reluctant to sign a petition in front of others. As for the more goody-two-shoe ones, maybe they were just reluctant to have any ties to us, and so they didn’t want to help out in public?”

If it were in a place such as the computer classroom where one could remain safely unseen, they would then be able to sign the petition discreetly.

“This whole thing has Akasaka written all over it.”

“Kouhai-kun, where’s Dragon?”

“He was still using his laptop computer to work on his stuff even after

homeroom ended, so there's a possibility that he might still be in class."

His work might not have ended yet.

As soon as Misaki heard this, she immediately dashed out of the room. There was no question as to where she was heading. Sorata wanted to pursue her, and perhaps so did the others in the room with him.

"Let's all go then."

Jin's words served almost as a signal for him, Sorata, Mashiro and Nanami to begin chasing after Misaki as well.

The students they passed by along the way either shot them curious glances or hurriedly gave way to them.

The five of them dashed through the corridors faintly lit by the setting sun.

"We're not allowed to run in the hallways."

Despite this, Nanami's footsteps slowed not even in the slightest. Sorata turned to look at her, only to see an expression almost that of happiness on her face.

He understood how she felt, and he felt the irresistible urge to smile as well, as though the muscles in his face had all doped up.

"Dragon isn't here!"

"Then he should be by the entrance!"

The five of them instantly reconfigured their routes according to Jin's instruction. They dashed down the stairs heading towards the first floor.

The path leading straight to the school gates could be visibly seen through the spaces between the shoe cabinets.

They found him.

They spotted him at first glance.

He had a more slender and petite figure for a male, and he had long messy hair which sprawled messily all over his back. Most importantly, his haughty presence definitely indicated that that person was Ryuunosuke.

"Dragon-!!"

Misaki dashed out while still wearing her indoor slippers.

Ryuunosuke's shoulders jerked slightly in shock after having his name called out so suddenly.

The expression on his face as he turned around was that of abject horror.

Which was no surprise. After all, Sorata, Misaki, Jin, Mashiro and Nanami were all sprinting in his direction.

Misaki looked as if she was about to pounce on him. If Jin had not grabbed her by the collar at the last second, she would probably have done so and knocked Ryuunosuke unconscious.

In the end, Sorata ended up being the one hugging Ryuunosuke by

accident due to his overly large momentum.

“Whoa! Kanda, what the hell!”

It was hard to ever find him speaking in such a panicked tone, as he usually only spoke like that when fighting off Rita.

“The notebook in the computer classroom! Thank you so much! Honestly, I can’t thank you enough! Speaking of which, why didn’t you tell us?”

Sorata furiously shook Ryuunosuke’s shoulders, unable to control his own excitement.



Ryuunosuke turned away slightly in embarrassment.

“Engineers work in silence.”

“But, even so...”

“A-Also, shouldn’t you be letting go by now? Don’t hit my shoulders like that, it hurts.”

“Oh, um, sorry.”

Sorata quickly moved his hands off Ryuunosuke’s shoulders.

“But, what made you change your mind?”

The person who asked that question was Nanami.

“The job of a software programmer is to take normally unfinishable amounts of work, then realize it in an efficient manner.”

“That’s not even a proper answer.”

“Just take it that way for now.”

Jin stepped in.

Now, with Ryuunosuke’s help, they had over three hundred signatures. It was still slightly less than a third of the school’s population, so there was still a possibility that they could change the impossible into something possible, there was yet hope. Their results told them so.

Also, the emotions that they were currently feeling had nothing to do

with the amount of signatures they had. What caused the burning sensation in Sorata's chest was not something as simple as hard numbers. The fact that Ryuunosuke had acted for the sake of everyone else was what made them all truly happy.

Now, all the residents of Sakurasou were present.

Sorata, Mashiro, Nanami, Misaki, Jin and Ryuunosuke, all six of them.

There would definitely be a way.

For these people, nothing is impossible.

Infinite amounts of energy coursed through Sorata's body. He was not alone any more, he had everyone else. All the residents of Sakurasou were there with him, and this reliable sensation quickly converted into the courage to move on.

"Right~ we can't lose to Dragon, everyone, I'm gonna go collect some signatures of my own~!"

Misaki dashed energetically back to the school building, with Jin jogging behind her. They had no idea what Misaki might do this time. Nanami suddenly seemed to have recalled her purpose as well, and she turned to walk out the school gates.

"Kanda."

"Hmm?"

Sorata turned around as he heard a voice calling out to him.

"I still don't think that this is an intelligent decision."

The usual calm and collected Ryuunosuke was no longer present. He now turned his face away awkwardly, and his words appeared to have been carefully chosen before he spoke them.

"I figured you'd say that. It's your style after all, Akasaka."

"However, leaving all that aside, I think it's best that Sakurasou remains."

"I see."

"Also...having what you call 'comrades' isn't half bad."

"Didn't I say so?"

Sorata laughed jokingly, while Ryuunosuke adopted his usual expression, appearing both unhappy and confident in himself at the same time.

"Well then, let's continue to work hard and get more signatures."

Sorata bellowed.

However, both Mashiro who stood beside him and Ryuunosuke who stood in front of him merely nodded.

"I say, both of you, during this sort of moments you should be going like
"Yeah~!" and all!"

This drew no response from the both of them.

After which, at the completely wrong time –

“Yeah~”

Mashiro replied blankly, remaining motionless as she did so.

March the 2nd, Wednesday

These words were written on the Sakurasou meeting records.

- We only have four more days to carry out our petitioning activities. No matter what, we have to succeed. Secretary • Mitaka Jin

- Sakurasou will never die~ Addition • Kamiigusa Misaki

- We must gather more signatures! Addition • Aoyama Nanami

- Gather signatures. Addition • Shiina Mashiro

- The only thing we can do now is to work even harder! Addition • Kanda Sorata

- If we're going to do it, we might as well win. Addition • Akasaka Ryuunosuke

- Everyone, please give it your all, especially Ryuunosuke-sama, I'll be cheering for you! Addition • Maid

Chapter 3 - It's Nobody's Fault That it's Raining

Part 1

On the morning of the next day, a Thursday, Ryuunosuke met up with the others in order to carry out petitioning activities.

They yelled frenziedly at the school gates; they visited virtually all the school's classes; they stormed about at the sports facilities; they barged into the indoor sports hall; they hijacked club meetings. They went everywhere they could to get signatures for their petition.

Sakurasou was finally as one.

Be it asleep or awake, be it at Sakurasou itself or at school...the last time the six of them had acted together like this was all the way back during the cultural festival.

The six of them even ate all their three meals together.

In the morning they would eat the sandwiches prepared for them by Jin on the way to school; in the afternoon they would take control of the home economics classroom while discussing how they would go about their activities and fighting each other for various side dishes; at night they would eat in Sakurasou's dining room while as usual discussing how they would carry out their operations the next day.

"Kanda-san, where'd you get this grouper?"

"On the way back from school when I passed through the shopping district, a fish vendor I knew gave it to me. He told us to eat this so we can work harder."

"Kouhai-kun, what about this croquette here?"

“That was from one of the meat vendors. She told us to never give up.”

“Sorata, what about those nice-looking things over there? There’s a lot of them.”

“Don’t call them that! One of the bakers over at the Hashimoto bakery made them for us, of course.”

They were genuinely thankful for the generosity of all the vendors. The existence of these people who knew about their current predicament and actively gave them support was a huge relief for Sorata and the others who were essentially fighting an uphill battle all by themselves.

Even on days that might not have gone so smoothly for them, a few encouraging words from everyone over at the shopping district were enough to give them confidence that there were still people that stood on their side.

Yes, they were not alone.

They had people who supported them, who cheered for them.

They had comrades who accompanied them.

Although the pressure on each and every one of them increased as graduation day approached, they felt a genuine joy when cooperating each other to gather signatures for their petition.

Those days felt as if they were shining with a brilliant glow.

They didn’t know whether there was any meaning behind their actions, nor did they know whether they would receive anything in return for the effort they gave.

Even putting the matter of Sakurasou’s impending demolition aside, Jin and Misaki would be graduating on March the 8th.

Instead, if they were to consider the matter, it was all too possible that they would all be parting ways the very next year.

Hence, they wanted to do as much as they could with whatever little time they had left.

March the 3rd, a Thursday. Although they had spent the entire day dashing around the school, they had only gotten ten signatures. They had tried equally hard the next day, but once again they only had another ten signatures or so to show for their efforts. As for Saturday, due to the limited time they had, the amount of signatures they collected was in the single-digit range.

The amount of signatures they had collected over the previous two weeks stacked up to about a third of the student body. That number was still incredibly far off from their goal of two-thirds of the student body.

“It’s really far off, huh.”

March the 6th, a Sunday. Sorata mumbled this to himself at night while lying alone in his room. The wooden ceiling stared back down at him.

Since it was a Sunday, there was nothing he could do. Aside from the petitioning activities, Sorata still had to work on his homework with regards to the impending judging of his proposal, as well as meeting up with Kazuki for one last time. So, either way, there was nothing he could do on that day.

He had painstakingly completed the proposal of his project. Although it was considerably compressed due to budgeting and estimation reasons, it did not differ at all from its original, enjoyable roots as a rhythm/fighting game.

Now all he had to do was wait for the results.

“D...Did I do alright?”

Sorata thought he did. He had done everything he could, but why was he still asking himself such things?

He was unable to keep calm, unable to compose his thoughts, unable to straighten out his emotions. He no longer wanted to think, he just wanted to rest for a while. However, his brain refused to stop working, and he continued to think anyway. He thought about Sakurasou, about Mashiro, about Nanami, about the proposal. Everything was jumbled about within his head.

Tomorrow would be the moment of truth, and neither crying nor screaming would change that. That moment was approaching him slowly but surely, second by painful second.

Sorata thought to himself that he probably wouldn't be able to sleep today. But if he didn't get some rest, his body wouldn't be able to take it. For the sake of being ready for tomorrow's operations, he absolutely had to sleep.

His seven cats were sleeping comfortably at the corner of his bed.

“You guys sure have it easy.”

Sorata mumbled to himself once again, which was when he heard someone knocking on the door of his room...

“Sorata.”

He heard a voice after a brief pause. It was Mashiro's voice.

“I'm not asleep yet.”

Sorata straightened up his body and sat at the edge of his bed.

The door opened, and Mashiro stepped through it in her pajamas.

“What’s the matter?”

“Can’t sleep.”

“I see.”

Mashiro closed the door behind her and silently walked into the room, then sat down quietly beside Sorata. Sorata felt a slight bump on his shoulder, and he felt at ease with the feel of another person’s body heat pressing against him.

“Just like me then.”

“Hmm?”

“I can’t sleep too.”

“Mm...it’s been happening a lot recently. I don’t know what I should do to fall asleep any longer.”

“Have you tried counting sheep?”

“I’m not talking about sheep here.”

“That’s not it, I was referring to the rumor that when you can’t sleep, just try counting sheep, you know, like one sheep, two sheeps, and you’ll fall asleep. However, I’m the type of person who ends up concentrating too much on the sheep, so that method just makes it worse for me.”

“Sorata.”

“I don’t accept complaints.”

“You’re supposed to count them like one sheep, two sheep, not sheeps.”

“Really? Now that you mention it, that does seem like the case. Might as well take a look online to see which one’s the right plural.”

He couldn’t sleep anyway. Just as he was about to get up, he felt something soft bump into him from behind. Mashiro’s arms were wrapped around his waist.

“Ah.”

Sorata hurriedly attempted to stand up.

“Oi, Shiina?”

“I don’t understand.”

Mashiro’s somewhat unclear voice blended into the silence of the night.

“You don’t understand?”

“I just felt like doing it.”

“...I see.”

Even after being hugged by Mashiro like that, for some reason his degree of shock never exceeded past its initial level, when she had first embraced him. It might have been because he sensed that her arms were slightly trembling, as though she was afraid of something. He knew that she was afraid of tomorrow’s arrival.

Tomorrow would be the last day. If they were to fail to gather the signatures of two-thirds of the student body by tomorrow, Sakurasou would have no future.

However, it would not be an easy task at all. Sorata and the others knew

this very well.

“Sorata.”

Mashiro’s voice seemed to travel up his spine itself, as her face was buried in Sorata’s back, causing it to reverberate about his mind.

“What is it?”

“I like Sakurasou.”

“Me too. Everyone does. Jin-senpai, Misaki-senpai, Aoyama, Ryuunosuke, and even Chihiro, all of them like this place.”

“Mm, so we have to protect it.”

“Yeah.”

“We must protect it.”

“Definitely.”

“I’ll protect Sakurasou.”

Sorata had no way to estimate Mashiro’s determination through those words alone.

“We’ll protect it together.”

Thus, he could only nod and agree quietly.

“Yeah. That would be the best.”

Mashiro’s voice sounded as if she was happy.

“Everyone staying together is the absolute best.”

Soon after, Mashiro fell asleep. Sorata let Mashiro sleep on his bed, while he attempted to sleep once again on the hard floor.

He slipped off into dreamland, and the next day came just as easily.

Part 2

March the 7th.

The day before graduation day. Sorata was woken up by the sound of the pouring rain.

Thick layers of clouds not usually seen in the winter season appeared to be covering the entire sky. Even after Sorata and the others reached school, the rain showed no signs of letting up, and the sky was heavily laden with moisture.

The third lesson of the day was modern Japanese.

Their teacher, Shirayama Koharu, spoke with a slow, completely limp voice without any energy in it, and Sorata had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. It appeared to be something about the topics tested during the next semestral exam after the graduation ceremony.

Sorata listened with a look that could rival the teacher's lack of enthusiasm, and all that she said simply went in one ear and out the other.

Now wasn't the time to be sitting in class, and exams weren't important either.

The next day would be graduation day. Which meant that today would be the deadline for them to collect signatures for their petition.

There was not enough time, there was absolutely not enough time. They

didn't have enough signatures either...this morning, Sorata, Mashiro, Nanami, Jin, Misaki and Ryuunosuke had once again yelled their hearts out at the school gates, with what little hope they had remaining.

"For the sake of Sakurasou's survival, please help us sign this petition!"

This same line had been repeated by them countless times.

The students who had helped out offered them words of encouragement from the sidelines, like "Good luck" or "Don't give up", et cetera, et cetera.

However, a good majority of the students simply passed by, ignoring them. Today would be the very least day...until the very bitter end, the students' disinterest proved to be their largest and most problematic enemy.

They were at their wits' end. There didn't seem to be any possibility of them rising up from the ashes this time.

But, why was this happening?

Why was his heart so calm, so collected? Sorata, who was as of this moment pretending to listen in class, felt not even the slightest bit of anxiousness. He had already went past that stage long ago.

Because Sorata himself knew very well. Was it the last weekend...he may have even realized it much before that. Sorata had already envisioned this future long ago, he had already faced the reality that they would fail in their petitioning activities. He felt as if if he were hit hard enough at this very moment, his heart would shatter into bits...

So he had made mental preparations in advance.

Curse the human body's survival instincts.

But, he refused to let himself give up just because of this, as they had all planned to try one last time after school.

It wasn't because they felt that they should at least work hard until the very end; it wasn't because they hoped for a miracle, they just felt that it was the only right thing to do in this situation. Although the reason behind it did seem rather convoluted, there was nothing wrong with what they were going to do - Sorata could say that confidently.

As soon as he realized this, his mood inexplicably brightened, and everything suddenly grew clearer.

- So, had he given up after all?

Sorata asked in the direction of the rainy sky outside.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of a rather large drop of rain splash onto the floor.

It wasn't coming from outside.

It was closer. Right beside him...

Sorata's body moved by itself, out of curiosity, almost as if controlled by an invisible force, and he turned to look at Nanami who was sitting in the seat adjacent to his.

She was sitting up straight, eyes facing forward. Sorata had thought she was listening attentively to Koharu-sensei, but that was before he noticed the small stream of tears that was flowing slowly down her cheek...

"...!"

Sorata let out a silent cry of surprise. In the instant that he saw Nanami's face, a shock that penetrated his nervous system struck his spine,

passing through his brain.

Upon taking a closer look, he noticed that Nanami's eyes weren't focused on anything.

Teardrops continued to spill out of the corners of her eyes, just like water overflowing from a container that had already been filled to the brim.

The two streams of tears rolling down her cheeks merged to form large droplets of water down at her chin, which fell onto her notebook.

Her teardrops muddled her writing, until the words written there were no longer legible.

Koharu-sensei instantly grew silent, having noticed Nanami's strange behaviour. In the midst of this complete silence, only the gentle sounds of Nanami's tears dripping down her face could be heard, and they gently reverberated throughout the classroom.

Their classmates began to murmur silently as well, their queries slowly but surely spreading like wildfire throughout the class.

"Hmm? Nanami, what's wrong? Are you alright?"

Mayu Takasaki, a friend of Nanami's, promptly stuck her petite body in Nanami's direction to see what exactly was going on.

"I'm not quite sure, but I think she's crying."

Yayoi Honjou, another classmate of theirs who was a friend of both Nanami and Mayu, replied in Nanami's stead. Yayoi was staring concernedly at Nanami as well.

Their classmates began to speak louder, and cries of "What's going on?" and "What happened?" could be heard. Sorata finally decided to call out

to Nanami, as he disliked hearing such whispers.

“Aoyama.”

However, Nanami didn't seem to have heard him.

Her tears continued to fall.

“I-Is something wrong? Aoyama-san.”

Something finally stirred within the depths of Nanami's eyes as Koharu called out to her.

“Are you alright?”

Koharu began studying her face.

“I...”

Nanami uttered, half-sobbing as she did so.

It seemed as if she had yet to realize that she was crying.

Numerous questioning gazes shifted towards Nanami, and in order to prevent this, Sorata stood up, intentionally scraping his chair against the floor to create a diversion.

After which, he opened his mouth before his teacher could do so:

“Sensei, Aoyama doesn't seem to be feeling well. I'll take her to the nurse's office.”

“Oh, um, please, thank you.”

Koharu-sensei replied instinctively due to her surprise.

“Let’s go, Aoyama.”

Sorata grabbed Nanami’s arm, half-dragging her to her feet, then slowly but silently trudged out of the classroom with her still in tow.

Sorata did not say a single word throughout the duration of their journey to the nurse’s office. He knew the reason behind why she was in this state, so there was no point in asking any questions. There will definitely come a day when she won’t be able to take it any longer – this thought had crossed his head many times in the past.

The nurse’s office was empty. The teacher posted there had probably left his or her post to use the restroom or something.

Sorata lowered Nanami onto one of the beds there silently.

Although she had already stopped crying, her eyes were still brimming with tears. It would only be a matter of time before the floodgates opened yet again.

Just as Sorata was puzzling over what he should say next, Nanami opened her mouth and said:

“I’m fine. Just head back to class without me, Kanda-san.”

“But...”

“Honestly, I’m perfectly fine, I just got careless there for a moment.”

Nanami grabbed a piece of tissue paper which she then used to wipe the tears off her eyes and blow her nose, completely avoiding looking at Sorata.

“That just means you’ve been holding it back all this while.”

Nanami’s expression carried no traces of grief, regret, dissatisfaction nor

anger.

All that remained on her face were the traces of tears, and pain.

Pain because she had failed her auditions, and thus failed to be recruited by the agency...a bottomless, never-ending sense of pain.

"Until tomorrow."

She spoke with determination. The next day would be the graduation ceremony.

"I don't want to look depressed, at least not before I see Kamiigusa-senpai and Mitaka-senpai off."

Nanami said and smiled.

"So please...just let me be alone for now."

"..."

Was it really alright to leave her alone? Nanami looked so frail, her shoulders, her figure, her hands and her feet...even her usual confident voice just seemed so frail...

"With you around I won't be able to relax, you know."

Sorata immediately tightened his jaw at this.

"...I understand. If anything happens, be sure to call me. Don't forget that."

"Mm, I'll go back to class as soon as I calm down."

"Fine. So, I'll be waiting for you there then."

“Yep.”

Nanami waved Sorata off, away from the nurse’s office where she lay resting.

Just as Sorata was climbing the staircase leading back to class from the nurse’s office, his phone began to ring.

He absentmindedly glanced at the phone screen to see who the caller was, only to see Kazuki’s name displayed upon it.

He suddenly recalled that the proposal judging had begun at ten in the morning of the same day. It wouldn’t actually be that surprising for the results to come out about now. However, there could only be one reason why Kazuki would bother to call.

Despite this, Sorata wasn’t shaken even in the slightest. No, his lack of a reaction might have been because he was already broken inside due to what had happened to Nanami just earlier. Hence, even though the name “Fujisawa Kazuki” was displayed upon the screen of his phone, he did not feel a single thing.

Sorata picked up the phone.

“Hello, Kanda speaking.”

“Hello. This is Fujisawa.”

“Thanks for calling.”

“Are you free to talk now?”

“No problem, it’s recess period anyway.”

Although it actually wasn’t, nothing really mattered to him at this point.

“The judging has already ended.”

Considering the fact that it had already ended, the results must have been released as well. Sorata had heard that the results would be released during the event itself. Kazuki’s tone was not unlike his usual one, leaving Sorata unable to guess whether the verdict would be 「DEAD」 or 「ALIVE」 .

“Sadly, you failed to pass this round.”

Kazuki cut straight to the chase, not bothering to say anything else beforehand.

“I see...”

Although Sorata had previously felt nothing, his body jerked slightly at this. He felt a painful sensation at his chest, as if something was being forcefully driven into his body. He felt as if his normally transparent body was being corroded and violated by jet-black emotions, and a strange dissonant feeling enveloped his body from his fingers to his toes, sparing not even a single strand of his hair.

“Kanda-san.”

Kazuki’s voice sounded distant all of a sudden. No, the thing that was growing distant was Sorata’s consciousness.

“Yes.”

After Sorata replied, Kazuki sighed a long, deep sigh, as if contemplating whether or not he should continue.

“Actually, among the proposals presented during the judging, there was another rhythm game.”

“...”

Sorata was shocked speechless.

“Although I can’t exactly reveal the details to you, it essentially utilizes music videos with the videos themselves being animations, as well as VOCALOID songs that have been growing in popularity recently on the internet.”

Just from Kazuki’s words alone, Sorata could tell that it would be fairly well-received.

“Although the actual gameplay of the game itself is extremely similar to that of previous, more traditional rhythm games, that proposal passed instead.”

Which basically meant...

“Essentially, there was no need for two rhythm games?”

“Yes. That was actually the biggest contributing factor to your project’s rejection.”

“But this...that’s just...”

The entire situation was out of Sorata’s control.

“The key deciding factor was the disparity between the estimated sale counts. Since the general public already has some basic knowledge regarding anime or VOCALOID-related material, if that project is actually made into a game, the sales would at least hit about a hundred thousand...and after taking a look at the current market situation, it might even reach twice that. Compared to your “Rhythm Battler”, which requires players to get to know the game and its music from scratch, you’re clearly in the more disadvantageous position.”

“I see...”

“Since the judging also includes factors like sales projections, aside from factors like the originality or how interesting the game is, profit also plays a large part.”

Kazuki had mentioned that many times during their discussions as well. Despite that, Sorata had still maintained the hope that “My game can still pass since it’s interesting.” Kazuki held the same sentiment.

“I must sincerely apologize for what happened. If I had planned out the schedule of our discussions earlier, and applied for a place within the judging earlier, we would have been able to avoid situations like this where we would have to compete against games of similar genres.”

“No, I must thank you instead, Kazuki-san. You made time for me even on your days off...it was due to your help that I was able to improve the proposal this much, and I learnt a lot as well.”

Sorata’s words carried no hint of any emotion. Despite this, he was being completely sincere.

“No need to thank me for all that. Sometimes, the things that you can’t change will decide your future. No matter how hard you work, there will still be some things that you cannot affect. It’s unreasonable, I know. That’s why you don’t have to accept this so easily.”

As Sorata listened to Kazuki speak, he thought about Sakurasou, and about Nanami.

Their petitioning activities had not achieved any results despite their efforts, and neither had Nanami’s hard work paid off. The world was filled with such injustices.

“However, society is just completely filled with such unreasonable things.”

Was that really so? Sorata thought with his half-addled brain. It was just too strange, why were so many unjust things happening around him at this exact time...it felt almost improbable. However, since the world was filled with such things anyway, there was nothing he could do about it. Since the world was filled with such things, he could only accept them, or else he would not be able to continue moving on.

"I'll talk to you about this another day."

"Right."

Sorata painstakingly replied with all the effort he could muster.

"Is there anything you would like to ask me right now?"

Sorata wanted to get off the call as fast as he could, so he had originally planned to say no to that question. However, under Kazuki's gentle urgings, he asked instead:

"Could you tell me how you personally felt about my proposal this time round?"

Kazuki replied without a moment's hesitation.

"As a developer, I would absolutely love to develop it."

He then continued, more cheerfully:

"As a player, I would definitely want to play it. Based on the originality of this project, this project could become an extremely interesting game, but if the production were to mess up even in the slightest, it could become a total flop."

His opinion was direct and to the point, and Sorata was grateful for this. If he were to have said some ridiculous words of encouragement or consolation instead, Sorata wouldn't be able to take it.

"Thank you so very much, I feel much better now."

"You're welcome. I'll be in touch."

Kazuki hung up.

Sorata had reached his limit by then, and he was suddenly assaulted by a wave of dizziness, forcing him to support his right shoulder against the wall, and he slowly slid onto the ground. He felt hollow and empty, lacking the strength to stand.

He bent his knees and half-kneeled, half-sat on the ground, his body shaped like the character < . He couldn't lift his head up to look in front of him, as he felt as if the ground was slowly sucking him in.

His phone was still on as well, and it lay dejectedly on the floor.

"...This...is rather painful."

His voice came out unusually hoarse, making him feel disgusted, as if someone else other than him was speaking from his mouth.

"It can't be real..."

However, he couldn't remain silent, for if he were to do so, his emotions would well up inside him, almost as though they would eventually explode within his stomach.

Sorata looked down at his hands to realize they were trembling uncontrollably, and so were his feet.

"What's going on..."

His body had only just felt the shock of failing the judging, which was why he couldn't stop trembling.

He felt no dissatisfaction nor sadness.

He just felt shock.

His chest felt unbearably uncomfortable, and his throat felt blocked, leaving him unable to properly breathe. He felt pain every single time he tried to do so.

Sorata bent even lower, causing his forehead to rub against the floor tiles. It felt hard and painful, and for some reason although it was icy cold, he felt no comfort.

“Ah – dammit...”

He scrunched his body up like a turtle retreating into its shell, just waiting for the indescribable pain that was inflicting him to pass him by.

His initial failure, back when his original proposal was turned down, felt nowhere close to this. The time and effort he had put into this project, as well as the expectations he had had for himself formed an extremely lethal combination; as his failure threatened to push him past the point of no return. As they say, the bigger they are, the harder they fall.

“Just because there’s another rhythm game, what kind of stupid reason is that anyway...”

He had never anticipated that the cause of his failure could be something so ridiculous.

“It’s not like I can predict what all the other groups are doing for their projects!”

If he had simply been told that his project was too boring or too uninteresting, the blow might have had been softer. Sorata had actually mentally prepared himself beforehand in case such a situation arose,

and he would have simply accepted those reasons as his own shortcomings and continued moving on.

He had endured many hardships by using this method, as he would simply solve the problem by altering his own way of thinking instead.

If his proposal had been rejected during the first round, he would have accepted the possibility that his project was simply too uninteresting, and back to the drawing board it would be. If the responses to his presentation were lackluster, he would have accepted the possibility that he simply had not explained everything to the judges well enough, and he would go back to the drawing board once more.

However, this time was different.

This time, the reason why he failed was not related to his personal circumstances at all.

Another person's proposal had got in his way.

"You tell me, what am I supposed to do in this situation..."

What could he possibly reflect upon from all this? What could he possibly take away from all this? Various unhappy, dissatisfied emotions began brewing within him.

"This is just too hard to accept..."

It was true, as he felt as if he would go insane if he didn't say something, anything at all, as if those unspoken words would swell up and explode inside him.

"..."

It wouldn't do him any good going on like this. Sorata decided to think about other things, and the first thing that happened to cross his mind

was Nanami's tough, determined-looking smile.

Nanami had not uttered a single word of complaint since she had failed her auditions, and neither had she ever looked unhappy in front of Sorata. She merely kept her emotions to herself, those painful, unhappy emotions that would make one feel as if one were being squeezed dry like a sponge. Could he really leave her alone like that?

"..."

Think, think. Sorata kept urging himself to think faster, but no answers seemed to appear. What good would it be to keep thinking with this useless brain of his?

"It's no good...I just can't understand any of this."

Sorata picked up his phone off the ground, fiddled with the keys briefly and sent a text message.

- Do you think Aoyama is alright?

The recipient was Ryuunosuke.

He didn't immediately get a response. Which would mean that the person replying would be Ryuunosuke himself, and not Maid-chan replying in his stead.

After about thirty seconds, his phone vibrated briefly.

- Are you a bloody idiot, Kanda? Do you think she would be crying like that if she's alright?

Blunt as always.

"Haha."

Sorata couldn't help but laugh as he read the message.

Just as Ryuunosuke had said.

It was a stupid question.

It was something that could be figured out even without thinking, something that could be figured out even with his mind in its current, befuddled state.

His legs were still shaking, and his hands weren't exactly in proper working condition yet. Although his body was aching and quaking all over, Sorata managed to grit his teeth and get to his feet, emitting groans not unlike that of someone crawling out of a pit in the ground.

He sniffled a little. Although he wasn't crying, his body was enveloped in that surreal, detached sensation one gets after a good cry.

If he could, he would have just continued lying there on the cold hard ground and fell asleep, he genuinely wanted to do so. Before his emotions settled down, he didn't want to get up.

However, his feet continued trudging forward bit by bit back towards the nurse's office, they trudged step by step down the stairs. If he were to collapse on the ground now, he might not be able to get up again.

"Aoyama!"

Sorata yelled out as soon as he threw open the door to the nurse's office.

Sayoko Hasuda, the teacher-on-duty who wasn't present earlier had a shocked expression on her face, evidently startled by his sudden entry.

"What's wrong? Kanda-san."

Probably because her glasses gave off a rather serious, focused air to her;

Sayoko who was all decked out in white clothing looked more like a chemistry or physics lecturer. Sorata remembered that she was around the same age as Chihiro and Koharu as he noticed that she wore her black hair long.

He promptly proceeded towards the beds placed there, ignoring her.

However, Nanami was nowhere to be found.

He dragged open the curtains shrouding the other beds as well, but to no avail.

“Sensei, where’s Aoyama?”

“Aoyama-san? Was she here earlier?”

She couldn’t possibly have returned to class. If she had taken the quickest route there, she would’ve bumped into Sorata along the way. Since that was out of the question, where else could she have went...

Sorata dashed straight out of the nurse’s office, not giving himself the time to answer that question.

“Ah, Kanda-san!”

He didn’t even turn around despite being called.

He ran along the corridors.

He looked in the hallways, the stairwells, out the windows, even in the empty classrooms.

Nowhere.

She wasn’t in the school building.

If so, was she outside? It was still raining very heavily, muddling the scenery outside just like a botched painting.

“...”

She could have just went to the toilet.

She could have returned to the nurse's office already.

Just as Sorata was about to return to the nurse's office to make sure of this, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye. If one were to proceed straight along the path jutting out of the hallways connecting the school buildings, one would arrive at the university's garden, right where the gardening club's parterre was situated.

Although he only saw it for a brief instant, it was more than enough. Sorata couldn't possibly mistake Nanami's signature ponytail.

Sorata threw open the hallway window, without bothering to take an umbrella nor change out of his indoor slippers, as he just wanted to get to Nanami as quickly as possible – that was the only thing he cared about at that moment.

He kicked off of the floor to gain momentum and vaulted over the window in one fluid motion. He dashed across the sandstone-paved pathway, completely disregarding the fact that he was still in his indoor slippers.

The rain continued to batter and beat down upon him, and he quickly felt an extremely uncomfortable, wet and sloshing sensation surge through his body as his socks were quickly soaked due to the rain. His shirt and pants quickly began to stick onto his skin due to this very reason as well. However, just he was drenched to the core, he felt refreshed for some reason. At this point, Sorata just wanted to torture himself.

He immediately began to run.

Nanami was just beside the parterre.

Right underneath the Sakura tree, both the earliest to bloom in the whole garden and the innermost placed fauna within the whole compound. It would usually begin to bloom between late February to early March, but by then it was already beginning to wilt due to its age. The rain continued to pelt the Sakura flowers, while Nanami stood there watching, looking up at them, her hands hanging lifelessly by her sides, her ponytail which she took great pride in lacking its usual liveliness as well, simply splattered over the back of her neck as the rain continued to fall.

Sorata approached her slowly.

He heard Nanami's sobs through the pouring rain.

It was then that Sorata realized that she was not looking at the Sakura flowers, instead she was still trying to hold back her tears that were already gathering and threatening to overflow, using the raindrops to mask them.

"Aoyama."

Sorata called out to her from behind.

"That's enough."

"..."

The sound generated by the pouring rain was fairly loud, thus forcing Sorata to yell to get her attention.

"That's enough!"

“...”

“I’m really, honestly happy that you put in so much effort for the sake of Sakurasou, for Shiina, for Misaki-senpai and Jin-senpai. I just can’t express my gratitude towards you sufficiently!”

Sorata had no idea whether it was appropriate to tell her those things at the time, as he was simply spouting whatever came off of the top of his head in words, without any modifications nor falsifications. He didn’t believe that it was enough to redeem Nanami. Despite this, he felt the need to do something, anything for her. No, to be precise, he was already doing it.

“But, there’s no need for you to sacrifice so much for our sakes!”

He cried out, mustering all the energy he had left within him, and his voice cracked in the depths of his throat. This blunder was masked by the rain as well.

“...That’s not it.”

“Aoyama?”

“I said, THAT’S NOT IT!”

“...!”

Sorata sputtered for a brief moment as he saw the expression on Nanami’s face when she turned around. It was completely dead, devoid of emotion, and her eyes were blank, making it seem as if she was both looking at, and through, Sorata.

I shouldn’t have let her hold it in all this while. Sorata silently regretted his decision even as he knew it was hopeless.

“I’m not that kind of person.”

Nanami's expression then began to contort manically, making it appear as if she was both crying and smiling.

"Don't go and think of me as some sort of good person..."

"Why not?"

"I'm just someone who uses everything around me as an excuse..."

"Excuse?"

"All that crap about 'the Sakurasou crisis', 'I have to take Mashiro's feelings into account', 'I can't let myself cry in front of Kamiigusa-senpai and Mitaka-senpai'...excuses, excuses, excuses."

"How are those excuses?"

"Because I was so scared...I get absolutely terrified whenever I even think about the possibility that all the time I've spent over the past two years might have been completely wasted..."

Sorata decided to not interrupt her any longer. It didn't matter to him even if she were to begin spouting nonsense, as he felt that she needed to get everything she needed to say off her chest.

"Which was why I made up all these excuses about Sakurasou, about Mashiro, about Kamiigusa-senpai and Mitaka-senpai...just to prevent myself from being hurt..."

"...Aoyama."

"I'm just a person who, in order to pretend as if I was never damaged at all, in order to conceal my own feelings, manipulated and used so many things to my own benefit!"

“ ... ”

“That’s why, don’t you dare thank me for doing something like that! You can’t even claim that the things I’ve done are out of good will!”

“ ... ”

“I’m none of those things...”

Nanami muttered to herself and lowered her head.

Sorata felt nothing but frustration. Frustrated at the fact that although Nanami was right in front of him, he could do nothing to alleviate her suffering. Frustrated at the fact that his own words had caused Nanami, who was already hurting this much, to begin hurting herself even more...frustration was all he felt.

“No, you’re every single one of those.”

“ ... ”

“Of course you’re every single one of those things!”

What would Nanami be, if not gentle?

“I was saved by you, Aoyama. It was because of you that I was able to work this hard over these past two weeks.”

“ ... ”

“If you weren’t around for us all this time, our petitioning activities wouldn’t have lasted until now.”

Their petitioning activities were going terribly, and they had faced many difficulties along the way, so it was a miracle that they had not given up until now. Nanami who had concealed the fact that she had been heavily

affected by her failure in the auditions had given Sorata strength instead. Since Nanami could do it, he felt even more motivated to spur himself forward, to motivate his cowardly, petrified soul.

“It’s all because of you, Aoyama!”

Despite all he had said, Nanami continued to shake her head like a stubborn child, persistently denying his claims.

“So it’s fine, Aoyama!”

“How can it possibly be fine!?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore!”

“How could it possibly not matter anymore!?”

“That’s enough.”

It really was enough. Enough for a very long time.

“Stop thinking about things that are already in the past!”

“...I’m the worst.”

Nanami continued to shake her head.

“Stop finding excuses to blame yourself!”

“...I’m just the absolute worst!”

“Enough, that’s enough! Just face the fact that you failed your auditions and moved on. Stop trying to run away from your problems!”

“...!”

Nanami looked up at Sorata, widening her eyes as she did so, as if she was looking at something wondrous, something she could not comprehend, and her lips quivered faintly. In the next instant, the corners of her eyes and mouth began to scrunch up.

"It's perfectly fine, Aoyama, you can do it."

Sorata believed that she had been holding in her feelings all this while. Actually, it might have all turned out fine if she had just let herself go and cried on the day that she had received her results. As he considered this possibility, he felt deep pangs of regret. Sorata had to clench his jaw in order to prevent himself from crying, and he felt throbs of pain coming from the back of his nostrils.

"Tell me everything that's on your mind, Aoyama."

"Kanda-san..."

"I'm really grateful to you for working so hard for us."

"But I..."

"Thank you."

"Did I really put in effort..."

"Of course you have, and more than anyone else at that...more than anyone else in the whole world. Aoyama, you've done your best!"

Tears began flowing down Nanami's cheeks as he said this. The tears continued to flow in place of the strange emotions that had begun to take form within her heart.

"Waaaahhhhhh!"

Nanami grasped tightly onto Sorata's chest, and let out her long-

repressed emotions in a single, painful cry.

“Did the past two years of my life amount to nothing at all!?”

Her emotions that were bloated to the point that they became unable to handle flooded out like ants from a nest.

“The effort I put in was meaningless!”

“ ... ”

Her sobs pierced Sorata’s chest.

“Meaningless...”

If only he could say something like “That’s not the case.”. If only he could say something like that and believe it. Sadly, he could not.

Sorata was undergoing the same struggles due to his failure to pass the proposal judging as well.

He could only ask himself this.

- If you put in effort into doing something but you fail anyway, does that make your efforts meaningless?

He wanted someone to give him the answer, if possible. Sorata just wanted to redeem Nanami’s tainted soul

“I’ve been holding back all this time.”

“ ... ”

He felt increasingly despaired for every word she spoke.

“Even when Mayu and Yayoi invite me to go out with them to shop or

sing karaoke...I turn them down because I don't want to regret it if I were to slack off from my job! I've been holding back all this while!"

"I know."

"I've been saving on food and other necessities as well..."

"I know. I know that."

"I want to go out and have fun too. But...!"

"Yes, I know."

"I've already dedicated two years of my life..."

"I understand."

"But, in the end it was all for naught!"

"..."

Sorata felt as if he was going to suffocate. Nanami's words coiled tightly around his heart.

"It meant nothing, nothing at all!"

"..."

"Now that I've failed my auditions, it means nothing!"

"...Aoyama."

"Tell me."

"..."

“Kanda-san, TELL ME!”

“...”

“What exactly did the last two years of my life amount to?”

Nanami looked straight up at Sorata. Her face was completely sullied by a mixture of rainwater, her tears and her mucus.

All that was left on her face was sadness and despair.

“Tell me...”

Nanami continued to repeat this sentence in her hoarse, cracked voice as she pounded weakly on Sorata’s chest with her fists, so weakly that it was no different from caressing. If she was going to hit him, Sorata figured, she might as well hit him with her best shot, anything to redeem herself from this pit of despair she had fallen into.

“Why didn’t I make it? I put in so much effort too!”

“Aoyama.”

“Why wasn’t I chosen...am I that worthless...”

“...”

Sorata couldn’t let her say anything more as she was already hurting enough, and at this rate she would only continue to hurt herself even more.

As he could not think of any other way to do so, he simply embraced Nanami, pressing her head against his shoulder, hugging her so tightly that she was unable to utter another word...

Nanami began to cry once more.

The rain continued to fall.

Sorata was unsure of how long they had been standing outside in the rain, but he was faintly sure that he heard the school bell going off twice in the distance. He promptly dismissed this as his imagination running wild again.

After Nanami calmed down slightly, Sorata led her back towards the nurse's office. She might get a cold wearing completely soaked clothes.

When Sorata grasped her hand and began to walk, Nanami followed without a single word, nor did she attempt to resist.

As the teacher over in the nurse's office, Sayoko, saw the state Nanami and Sorata were in, she was noticeably shocked, but she simply passed them a towel and new clothes without asking too many questions. There were PE uniforms and a tracksuit, as well as a change of underwear. Sadly, no socks were provided.

Sorata dragged Nanami, who was now not unlike a puppet who had had its strings severed, back towards one of the beds located there and drew the curtains.

"Aoyama, you can change your own clothes, right?"

"...Mm."

Sorata himself began to change behind one of the other curtains.

He wiped his hair with a towel and took off his soaking wet clothes. His shirt had already begun to stick to his skin due to how wet it was, making it even harder for him to remove it. His pants gave him similar difficulties as well, and he was only able to take them off after a few

brief minutes of tangling with them while sitting on the ground. It took three times as long as it normally would for him to change.

Before long, he heard noises coming from behind the curtain where Nanami was changing. However, it was too soft, so he was unable to discern what it was.

“Did you say something?”

Sorata asked, but he received no reply.

“Aoyama?”

He tried again.

“Everything’s fine.”

She replied in a lifeless voice. It was somewhat worrying.

“Are you sure? Is everything alright?”

“...”

“Aoyama?”

“I was just saying that my underwear’s completely drenched...”

Nanami replied, somewhat flustered as she did so due to Sorata’s relentless questionings.

“That sounds pretty erotic.”

Sorata cracked a joke, seeing as she had already loosened up.

“Idiot, pervert.”

He couldn't help but laugh. Nanami's voice had begun to brighten up as well.

Sorata stepped out from behind the curtain as he finished changing, just in time to see Sayoko stroll towards him while holding two mugs of piping hot chocolate.

"Give one to Aoyama-san as well."

"Sure."

Sorata took the two mugs from her and approached the other curtain. Nanami should be almost done by now, he thought.

"Aoyama, are you done?"

"Yeah, I'm done."

Just as he heard her say so, the curtain drew open slightly from the right.

"What do you mean, you're done..."

Her hair was still drenched.

Sorata placed the mugs he was holding down onto a table and covered Nanami's head with a towel.

"Wait a sec, Kanda-san."

"No use arguing."

Sorata sat her down on the side of the bed and began to dry off her hair, albeit coarsely.

"I can do it myself."

"You clearly didn't do a good job at it...and here we go."

Nanami glared sharply at Sorata, having finally been released from his grasp. Her eyes were still wet, and they were bloodshot as well, causing them to turn red. She quickly turned aside and began to hurriedly redo her messy hair, presumably because Sorata was staring at her.

"My face is flat from all that crying, so don't stare at me."

"Your face is flat?"

"Means I look terrible."

Nanami used both her hands to shield her reddening nose.

"Nah, not at all. You look cute."

"Huh?"

"Ah, no, I'm sorry! That's not what I meant!"

"Oh, so you didn't."

"No, it's not that I didn't mean it...argh, you get what I mean."

"..."

"..."

Sorata handed Nanami her mug of hot chocolate in order to break the awkward wall of silence that was beginning to form between them. She slowly took it from him with both her hands and began to sip it slowly, all the while muttering under her breath that it tasted good.

It was then that the door leading into the nurse's office opened.

The person who walked in was Chihiro.

“I was the one who told her to come.”

Sayoko answered his question before Sorata could even ask.

Chihiro looked at them distastefully from head to toe, then sighed deeply, visibly fed up with matters as they were.

“You made others so worried too...if you both still have time to flirt around in here, you must be fine.”

“What!”

Just as Sorata was about to protest, Chihiro quickly strode over and placed her hands on Sorata and Nanami’s foreheads without warning.

His words of complaint promptly shrunk back into his throat. Chihiro’s hands were warm.

“It seems that Aoyama has a fever. Kanda, get the thermometer.”

Sorata grabbed a thermometer off the top of one of the tables there and passed it to Chihiro.

“Why’re you giving it to me?”

Chihiro passed it to Nanami.

Under normal circumstances, Nanami would usually deny that she had a fever at all, but now she quietly took it from her and slipped it into her collar, clutching it at her armpit using her arm.

They waited patiently for five minutes.

Chihiro was right, Nanami did have a fever. A thirty-seven-point-three

degree one.

“Here’s some medicine. Go rest after you’re done taking it.”

“Right.”

Nanami obediently took the glass of water and the tablets of medicine Chihiro passed as well. She popped the tablet into her mouth and swallowed it with the water. However, she did not immediately go back to lie down, as instead she simply stared up at Sorata, who was likewise staring back down at her.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“I think she wants you to sleep with her, Kanda-san.”

“O-Of course not.”

“Oh, is that so? Then tell him what you want him to do then.”

Chihiro then left the nurse’s office.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Silence began to brew once again between Sorata and Nanami. Sayoko appeared to be writing in some sort of logbook, so she was not paying particular attention to either of them.

“Um, Kanda-san...”

“What is it?”

“Could you please stay beside me until I fall asleep?”

"I'll stay here until you wake up if you want me to."

"Just until I fall asleep."

"I know."

"Don't you dare look at me while I'm sleeping."

"If I don't, how would I know whether you've fallen asleep or not?"

"True. That's a problem."

Nanami smiled and lay down. Suddenly, as if she was trying to find an excuse at the last moment, she said in her Kansai accent:

"If I don't have anyone to talk to, my mind will just run wild again..."

Sorata sat down on the adjacent bed and began to listen to Nanami without saying a word, occasionally butting in to either provide comic relief or answering any questions Nanami might ask him, usually regarding his opinions on certain matters.

She continued to repeat the exact same words about what had happened over the past two years...and then, her eyes moistened and she began to cry, then stopped crying again, this cycle repeated itself a few times as well.

They continued on like this for an indefinite period of time.

It continued to rain outside.

Nanami slowly began running out of things to say, and Sorata himself lay down on another bed. They had both calmed down significantly, so there was a possibility that Nanami might finally be tired enough to fall asleep now.

Just as Sorata thought about that, he suddenly spoke:

“Me too.”

“What?”

“Just now...I got the results of my proposal’s judging back.”

“Really?”

“I didn’t pass.”

“...”

Nanami was rendered speechless. The two of them stared up at the ceiling, not saying a word.

“I’m sorry...I was only thinking about myself.”

Sorata didn’t reply to this, instead he continued:

“I may have failed, but I think it’s good that I at least tried.”

“...”

“Of course, I can’t claim to say that I understand all that you’ve gone through these past two years. I don’t understand, because I’m not you.”

“...Mm.”

“But, there are some things that I understand now after my journey ended. Although I may have failed...but based on my current state, I think I’ve finally achieved happiness.”

“...Happiness?”

“What I made may have been a crude newbie’s attempt at a game, but I feel that I think I can understand the joy of creating something that is yours and yours alone.”

Sorata’s voice was especially clear and resonant within the otherwise silent nurse’s office.

“I feel that if you start doing something that you think is fun, it definitely will become a fun and enjoyable experience for you. That’s my take.”

“I understand.”

“It’s like how I played soccer until middle school, it’s pretty much the same feeling. When I first started I was just trying as hard as I could to kick the ball, then I became able to kick it to wherever I wanted it to be, and slowly I was able to pass the ball and score goals with it. I think these pleasures are something you can only attain after you work on something for a certain amount of time. The joy of getting good and something you initially suck at will definitely lead you on to experience more joys, unlike any you’ve ever seen. Depending on the circumstances, you might even feel happy when encountering difficulties.”

“...”

“I’m sure you’ve experienced all these things, haven’t you, Aoyama?”

Although Sorata himself was not an expert on the art of voice acting, he was confident that such sensations could be experienced regardless of the activity carried out.

“I’m actually fine with not getting past the judging...no, that’s a lie. I don’t feel fine, not even in the slightest. Of course I don’t feel fine. I feel terrible inside, as if I’ll start to cry if I even let my guard down for a single moment. I’m not even joking...and of course I hope that I’ll never have to experience a sensation like this ever again in my life, but now I

feel as if I no longer have the courage necessary to move on...however, it's because of all this that I finally realized something."

"Realized what?"

"Although the Kanji for the word may be the same, happiness and relaxedness are two completely different things." (TL note: 楽 is the Kanji for both words.)

"..."

"Even if you're bad at it, you can still enjoy the act of playing football. However, some joys can only be experienced when you're good enough at something. You have to practice really intensely, there's no shortcut nor easier way around it, the more you practice, the more you improve. There aren't any tricks around that can drastically and instantly improve your skills to make you, say, a world-class player representing Japan at the world stage."

"But, I just can't continue to work hard after all that's happened..."

Her tearful voice caused Sorata's heart to ache.

"Well, then just rest. You just need to stop for now and rest."

"..."

"You've been working hard all this while, Aoyama, so I think this is just fine."

"Kanda-san..."

"We can think about your future after you've recovered."

"..."

"If you think too much now, you'll just think about negative things, won't you? Or should I just advise you to not think about anything. If you ever want to think about things, just look for me and I'll talk with you. We can talk about anything, I'll be sure to listen intently."

"Mm."

"Everything will be fine, Aoyama."

"I know...I know..."

Her voice grew increasingly muddled as her sobs intensified, and Sorata could no longer hear what she was saying.

"We'll do it whenever you feel like."

"Ok..."

Nanami kept repeating the letters "OK" over and over from that point onwards as Sorata continued to talk. There was the possibility that she simply did not have the energy to rebut anything he said. Sorata stopped talking as he heard no more noises coming from her part, and he saw that she had fallen asleep.

He heard only the peaceful sounds of her breathing.

Sorata felt relieved and closed his eyes as well. I'll just rest for a while before heading back to class, he thought. I'll go back and attend lessons, return to my normal self. I can direct all my energy towards the petitioning activities later then.

As he made up his mind, his consciousness slowly began to fade and drift towards dreamland.

Part 3

Sorata had a bad feeling as he woke up.

He had planned to just rest for a brief moment, but he had fallen asleep instead.

It was completely dark around him. Half of the lights in the nurse's office were off, presumably for the two of their sakes. As he looked out the window, he realized it was dark outside as well.

The rain had stopped, allowing him to sneak a glance at the clear skies, but the sun was no longer there.

Sorata looked up at the clock hanging on the wall.

It was already past six-thirty.

"It can't be..."

He felt despair well up inside him.

It was the last day they had to carry out petitioning activities. Even the students staying back for club activities would have left by now.

Sorata hurriedly jumped out of bed and walked out from behind the curtains shielding him.

"Oh, you're awake."

Sayoko's cheery, carefree voice was there to greet him.

"I used the clothes dryer over at the university section to dry your

uniforms.”

Indeed, Sorata and Nanami’s uniforms were draped over a chair in the corner. Their schoolbags were placed there as well.

“Oh, those? Mitaka-san brought them over.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up!”

This line was directed towards Jin, who was not present.

“He begged me to let you both continue to sleep. He said something about you both haven’t been sleeping for a while, and you guys shouldn’t be fooling around like that just because you’re still young.”

To be precise, he couldn’t sleep.

“Of course I have to fool around, especially now!”

He had to do whatever that came his way, no matter how messy or complicated those things may be. Sorata had made up his mind to do this a long time ago, and now he found himself in a situation where he would have to honor his words.

Nanami woke up as well, presumably due to Sorata’s voice, and she poked her head out from behind the curtains. She looked much better already. Despite this, she had not yet made a full recovery, as she still looked rather dazed.

“It can’t be...it’s already this late?”

Nanami’s face turned as pale as a ghost as she looked at the clock.

“I’ll go take a look.”

Nanami proceeded to follow Sorata, but was stopped by Sayoko before she could do so.

Sorata dashed into the hallway, still wearing his borrowed PE uniform.

“Where’s everyone now...”

Considering the time, they would probably be at the school gates.

He ran furiously, almost to the point where his legs would no longer listen to him.

He bumped into a teacher along the way, and although he was warned to not run in the corridors, he blatantly ignored this. If he didn’t run now, he would die – that was his mindset at that moment.

Sorata dashed out of the school building, still in the slippers he took from the nurse’s office.

He saw four people standing at the school gates. His intuition had not failed him, the four were Misaki, Jin, Ryuunosuke...even Mashiro. The four were wearing transparent plastic raincoats, as it had rained not too long ago.

“Ah, Kouhai-kun!”

Misaki ran over to him, having noticed him approaching.

“Listen to this, Kouhai-kun! We got fifty-three signatures from today

alone!”

Misaki was smiling from ear to ear. However, this only made the situation even more depressing.

It was not enough. Although fifty-three in a day was still a new record for them, it was nowhere near enough. Even after adding in the signatures collected on that day alone, they only had about four hundred signatures in total.”

“Well then, we’ve done all we could. Although it’s still a little bit of distance away from our goal of collecting two-thirds of the school’s signatures.”

Not just a little bit.

Jin’s good intentions instead caused Sorata to feel even more pain, as he felt as if something was slowly digging chunks out of his chest.

“I...!”

Even the pitch of his voice sounded different.

“I wasn’t able to do the things I could do to the best of my ability! I wasn’t able to do anything!”

Although the whole incident was nearing its end, in the end he was unable to do anything except sleep in a corner.

“Kanda, don’t start throwing tantrums. You and the ponytailed one have both done enough these past two weeks. But, it was exactly because of the fact that you two acted tough that you were unable to

participate in today's activities."

Sorata had realized this himself.

Since he had heard that Sakurasou was going to be demolished, he was rendered almost completely unable to fall asleep. He couldn't sleep even when he was really sleepy as he was unable to stop himself from thinking, and when he would eventually fall asleep somehow, his sleeping hours averaged at only around two hours a day.

It grew even worse when he found out that Nanami had failed her auditions, as during the last few days of the past week, he felt a strong urge to throw up as he woke up every single morning, but he had not vomited up a single thing.

"If you were to continue to fool around and collapse under these circumstances, you would only be causing us problems. Let's say we had collected two-thirds of the signatures, the school would probably have seen the way we carried out the petitioning activities as a problem. The worst-case scenario would be that all our efforts thus far be thoroughly negated."

That was why they had let the two of them rest. All Ryuunosuke had said was true, and because of how true it was, it made him angry. Sorata felt angry that he was unable to probably manage himself even on such an important day.

"Also, although it may not be too kind to you on your part, Sorata, we couldn't just let Aoyama-san rest alone. She needs an accomplice especially in her current state, doesn't she?"

"...!"

Sorata realized that he had no way to refute this. It was true that if he had let her rest alone instead, her strong sense of responsibility would not allow her to forgive herself.

Sorata clenched his jaw and swallowed his grievances.

“Is Aoyama-san still in the nurse’s office?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, let’s all go fetch Nanamin together!”

Misaki bounded off with her usual vigor. Jin and Ryuunosuke silently trailed along behind her.

However, the other person that was with them did not move at all.

That person stood at the school gates, not making a single movement.

That person merely stood there, clutching onto the ledger they had used to collect signatures.

“Shiina.”

Sorata called out to her.

“Sorata.”

“...”

“How many more signatures do we need?”

“A lot...”

They needed just about three hundred more of them.

“Really? Well, we’ll just have to keep collecting them then.”

Mashiro seemed to have no intention of leaving her post at the school gates.

“Shiina...it’s over.”

“You’re lying.”

“...”

Mashiro’s eyes carried a hint of hostility, that of which he had never seen before.

“Sorata’s lying.”

“I’m not lying to you.”

“But...”

“...I’m not lying to you!”

Sorata thought to himself how nice it would be if he was, in fact, lying to her. However, there was no room for that.

“We haven’t collected the signatures!”

Mashiro said loudly, completely unlike her usual self."

"Sakurasou will disappear..."

"..."

"We still haven't collected them."

Sorata was rendered speechless. If he could, he would definitely continue to carry out the petitioning activities. He didn't want to give up until they had achieved what they came for. However, there was no way they could do so. It was almost seven o'clock, and no more students would be around in the school. The next day would be the graduation ceremony. They wouldn't be able to do anything on that day, and they could not rely on emotions to solve their problems. That was the dilemma that Sorata and the others were facing.

The time would come when everything would be over, despite that they had not achieved their goals. No, to be precise it had already come.

"Please assist us in our petitioning activities."

Mashiro's emotions silently, pitifully wilted at the empty school gates where nobody remained.

"March the 7th"

On this day, the Sakurasou meeting records were left completely blank.

Chapter 4 – Graduation Ceremony

Part 1

He opened his eyes to find a cute little butt that shook gently from side to side right before him.

"...So it's you today, Aoba."

He tried to shoo the cat away with his hands but got slapped on both cheeks with a slender, beautiful tail instead for his troubles, repeatedly. It appeared that the Siamese cat was not in a very good mood this morning.

"Really, you're too much..."

Sorata rubbed his cheeks gently and got up.

He yawned.

The hands of the clock on the wall indicated that it was seven thirty.

The cats scrunched up around Sorata all cried out at once, asking to be fed. Sorata pretended not to hear them and instead let out a long sigh, as if he were trying to exhale out the tiredness that plagued every fibre of his being.

"Ah...the sun's up."

The morning that he dreaded had still arrived anyway. If only yesterday could have gone on forever.

But wait, many things had happened yesterday that he had been unable to deal with as well, so it would be an equally terrifying prospect...if he had to say it, he would've chosen neither one of them.

March the 8th, the day of the graduation ceremony.

In another thirty minutes, all students of the school would have to

gather in the sports hall to attend the graduation ceremony in solemn fashion. Sorata would have to be there, as well as Jin and Misaki. Not to mention Mashiro, Nanami, Ryuunosuke and Chihiro.

"..."

Even as he visualised it, this whole situation didn't feel real to him at all. Was today really the day of the graduation ceremony? He didn't feel anything special. Yesterday had passed, and so today had simply come to take its place, only the date changed and nothing more.

Although that was definitely the case, his mood was visibly different from yesterday.

The flustered, panicky sensation that had bound him in the past had now disappeared without a trace. Even the sense of remorse that threatened to tear his body apart, as well as the guilt of not being able to do anything on the last day they had to petition had completely dissipated.

Sorata unconsciously placed his right hand over his chest, only to feel a hollow sensation as if a hole had been drilled into it.

He himself knew very well that the baser parts of him had already understood the truth. The truth that Sakurasou was going to disappear, and the truth that all the regret he had felt yesterday was completely meaningless...

Even under these circumstances, Sorata was not the type to be immature enough as to dismiss reality and claim that all this was a dream. He had tasted these bitter emotions many times in the past, and as for situations where nothing went as according to plan, he had faced them countless times as well. It was exactly because he was unwilling to acknowledge it that he knew it was the truth. That was how the world worked.

So, Sorata was already very clear about things.

It was also because of that that he felt so empty inside.

What he was going through now felt different from giving up, as he experienced a strange sense of reconciliation as well. Sorata still had no idea how to describe this feeling.

He gently caressed the head of his white-furred cat, Hikari who had jumped onto his leg, and nonchalantly looked around his room.

His gaze fell upon his mattress. The mattress which was originally pure white now had the two words "常勝" written on it. The reason for that was something that happened way back in the autumn. They had attempted to make a cloth curtain of sorts to welcome Rita, with Misaki penning those two words on it, which of course ended up being another complete failure of a project. (TN: The Kanji means 'Frequent Victory'.)

"'Frequent Victory' my foot, more like we lose every battle we fight."

They hadn't been able to collect the signatures of two thirds of the student body, and they hadn't been able to repeal the request for Sakurasou to be demolished as well. Even Sorata himself had been unable to pass the judging of his proposal. Even though he had wished from the bottom of his heart for Nanami to pass her auditions, in the end she still...

None of those things had went according to his wishes.

Sorata bit his lip and looked up at the poster that hung on the wall of his room. It was the concept art for "Milky Way Cat Nyanboron". Since he figured getting rid of it would be too much of a hassle, it ended up becoming a fixture in his room since last autumn.

The autumn he recalled was but a treasured memory now. Spring and summer too. Even Christmas Day, as well as the winter break, all felt

like they happened so long ago, as if he had stayed at Sakurasou for an incredibly long time, as if he had lived with everyone else there for a number of years now.

That was because this room of his simply contained too many memories.

He would frequently play video games with Misaki in front of the television, and sometimes he would drag Jin and Mashiro along to join in as well. Whenever he looked at the door, the smile that would be on Misaki's face every single time she barged into his room with alarmingly high spirits would leap vividly into his memory.

Even something as commonplace as his wardrobe contained unforgettable memories. The very first time that Sorata came to Sakurasou, Misaki was lying in wait inside that wardrobe for whatever reason.

He had slept on the floor numerous times as well. Whenever Misaki decided to hog his bed, whenever Rita came to visit, whenever Mashiro said that she wanted to sleep in his room...

He would be leaving this memory-filled place in a very short time. This place would have to be demolished one day. Under these circumstances, he couldn't bring himself to think about the future.

Despite this, Sorata was still forced to do so.

He had yet to achieve a single victory.

And hence, he felt the need to accomplish at least one last thing.

He wanted to see Jin and Misaki off sincerely.

"I have to get this done at least."

He wanted to see them off with a smile on his face, to tell them that they

didn't have to worry about anything anymore.

Sorata made up his mind to do so, then led his cats out of the room.

He walked towards the dining room and prepared to have breakfast.

As he did so, Misaki dashed down the stairs from the second floor.

"Morning, Kouhai-kun!"

She was already in uniform, fully prepared to leave. She stopped not for an instant, and immediately proceeded to put on her shoes at the front door before dashing out with her usual high spirits, crying out "Yahoo~" as she did so. The door was left open.

Sorata let the image of her gradually distancing figure engrave itself deeply into his eyes, leaving an impression in his mind.

Today was the last day, the last time he would be able to see Misaki in a Suiko uniform...and it would also be the last time he could watch Misaki run out energetically in such a manner, with her body swaying and skirt flapping...

Today was the end of everything.

Just as Sorata was being sentimental whilst watching Misaki run off into the distance, he felt a sharp blow to the back of his head.

"That hurts!"

"Don't get all sentimental this early in the morning."

Sorata turned to see Jin standing next to him, stifling a yawn.

"That's not what I was doing."

"Then, could it be that you were simply trying to take a good long look at everything since today is the last day?"

Jin's eyes smiled behind his glasses. Sorata knew Jin had saw right through him.

"Since you already know that, don't go saying it out loud on purpose!"

Jin ignored Sorata's protests and called out to Misaki's almost disappearing figure:

"Wait up, Misaki!"

Misaki immediately stopped in her tracks and sprinted back towards them.

"What is it?"

"I'm going with you, wait for me just a second."

"Understood!"

Misaki raised her hands just like an obedient grade-schooler. However, she was raising both hands, which in the traditional sense meant that she was wishing Jin longevity...or to put it more appropriately, she looked like a bear that was about to attack.

Jin walked back into the hallway, presumably to return to his room and change.

Misaki waited for him patiently, sitting on the steps leading up to the front door, opening and closing her upright legs just like a child.

Although Sorata had things he wanted to say to Misaki, whenever she was there in person, his mind would go blank just like a sheet of unused foolscap paper, leaving him unable to formulate any coherent sentences.

His tabby cat, Kodama, let out a meow, urging Sorata to begin pouring out its cat food. Sorata ignored it and returned to the dining room.

The floor let out a dangerous-sounding noise. He realised that he was now noticing things that he would not have normally noticed, presumably because his nerves were acting up.

He led his cats to the dining room only to find that someone else had already reached there before him.

Nanami was eating breakfast at her usual seat beside the dining table.

"Ah, Kanda-san..."

"Morning."

"Mm, good morning."

"..."

"..."

They said not another word to each other. Due to yesterday's events, the two of them still felt somewhat awkward around each other, and the silence made it increasingly uncomfortable for them. Sorata crouched in a corner of the dining room, using feeding the cats as an excuse to avoid talking to Nanami. Nanami instead chewed on her toast in an attempt to make the situation less awkward.

Sorata remained silent, choosing to stare at the cats who were fighting over their food.

He looked at Nanami from the corner of his eye, as he was worried about her condition after all her crying the previous day.

She must have had cried alone at night for a long time as well. Her eyelids were swollen, and the area underneath her nose had turned red from excessive wiping with tissue paper.

"Don't stare at me like that."

"Because you look terrible?"

"To think you'd dare to tell a girl that, you're despicable, Kanda-san."

Sorata looked at Nanami who was intentionally throwing a tantrum and sighed lightly in relief. This was proof that Nanami, who had stopped time for herself and lived in her own little world since she had gotten the results of her auditions back, was finally beginning to resume it, come to terms with reality, and move on.

"You said that yourself yesterday."

"That's true...but if you could, I'd like you to forget about what happened yesterday. I'm trying to forget as well..."

"...I want to do it all over again."

Sorata said unconsciously while stroking the backs of the feeding cats, spurred on by Nanami's words. He wasn't even planning to say those words, and at first he didn't even realise that he had said them.

"Kanda-san..."

Nanami looked at Sorata with a grief-stricken expression on her face. It's hopeless...her disturbed expression seemed to be saying.

"Sorry. Forget everything I just said."

"No, don't worry about it...I understand how you feel. But although I understand you...that's just not possible."

"Yeah. Impossible, it's just not possible."

Time is irreversible, and in real life you can't simply load from a previous save point when you're unhappy with a result, like in a video game. If that were possible, Sorata wouldn't be saying things like that, nor would he have to feel a perpetual sense of uselessness from regretting the words he had said.

The cats had finished devouring their food, and they began to pester Sorata for another bowl.

Sorata refilled their bowl with cat food and stood up.

"I'll go wake Shiina up."

"Ah, alright."

Sorata walked out of the dining room, a sense of awkwardness still surrounding it. Misaki was still sitting by the front door, throwing Sorata's shoes around as though they were toy planes. Although he did wish that she would stop doing that, he figured that stopping to talk to her would waste too much time, and so he walked up the stairs to the second floor instead.

Dangerous creaking noises drifted up from his feet for every step he took.

Room 201...He arrived at Mashiro's room after passing by Misaki's.

"Shiina, the sun's up."

Sorata opened the door of room 202 whilst calling out to her. There was no reply, possibly because she was still asleep.

The room was as messy and dishevelled as usual, with piles of clothes

and underwear scattered about the floor, not to mention manga manuscripts and storyboard drafts.

Sorata took a peek underneath her desk as per normal. Mashiro would always turn that place into a sort of nest and sleep in there. But for whatever reason, Mashiro was nowhere to be seen.

"Shiina?"

He then looked on the bed, and lifted up the blankets, but there was still no sign of her. Sorata even hunkered down on the floor and checked underneath the bed, but Mashiro was not there either. Searching the wardrobe proved fruitless too. Mashiro was not in her room, had she just went to the toilet?

Sorata first stepped out of her room.

"Shiina!"

His loud cries received no reply.

Instead it was Misaki who dashed up the stairs to meet him.

"What is it, Kouhai-kun?"

"Shiina isn't here."

Misaki tilted her head sideways in confusion.

He returned to the first floor and searched the showers and the toilets. However, there was still no sign of Mashiro.

Sorata then returned to the dining room to find not only Nanami, but Ryuunosuke there as well.

Ryuunosuke was gnawing on an entire tomato.

'Kanda-san, where's Mashiro?'

Nanami asked confusedly, as Sorata had returned from the second floor alone.

"She wasn't in her room..."

Not just her room, but everywhere he searched as well.

He had a bad feeling about this.

"Mashiron isn't anywhere upstairs. I can't get through to her with my cell as well."

Misaki walked down from the second floor, apparently having searched all the other rooms already.

"What do you mean she's not here?"

Jin stepped in as well.

None of those present could answer his query.

Sorata felt an uneasy sensation well up inside him.

In the midst of this tense atmosphere, Chihiro stepped into the room. She wore a light-coloured suit which brought out the aura of spring, obviously prepared specially for the graduation ceremony.

"Sensei, Shiina's--!"

"I know."

"...What do you mean?"

His tone of voice naturally turned cautious, causing that bad feeling he

had sensed earlier to begin spreading even further throughout his body, with his heart rate rising in suit.

"She wanted me to pass this to all of you."

Chihiro produced a large piece of canvas from behind her back.

It was the painting of Sakurasou that Mashiro had been working on in the arts classroom. Sorata had brought it back previously, since she had mentioned last weekend that she wanted to work on it over the weekend.

Chihiro hung it up on one of the walls in the dining room, and Sorata walked up to it to have a closer look.

"So it's completed, huh..."

Although the theme of the painting was simply school-related, there was a signature written in Romanji in the lower right corner.

He let the entire painting sink slowly into his vision, and in that instant it was as if time had frozen.

His consciousness had been sucked into the realm of the painting.

It was a painting of Sakurasou presented using gentle strokes of the brush as well as equally gentle contrasts of colour.

The rays of light from the evening sun in the painting captured its nostalgic sense, adding to the overall sense of warmth it exuded as well. This also increased the presence of the beautifully blooming cherry blossom flowers presented in the frame as well.

The two-story tall, decrepit wooden building depicted in the painting even managed to give off the sense that it was a special place which shined brilliantly with light.

Compared to when it was still in the works, the personality of the painting was completely different, and so were the feelings that it seemed to convey. The figures of the residents of Sakurasou who had not yet been drawn the last time Sorata had seen the painting, now attracted his attention this time around.

A figure was playing with seven cats in front of the front doors.

"Is that supposed to be me...?"

"Mm, apparently so."

The person who had nodded was Nanami. In the painting, she stood behind Sorata, and they were taking care of the cats together.

"Mashiron...she's good."

Misaki stood at the balcony on the second floor, waving down at Sorata and the others who were downstairs, and he could almost hear the very sound of her waving.

"Oh, definitely."

Jin was holding onto a shopping bag filled with leeks with one of his hands and was in the process of opening the front door with the other, seemingly having just come home from something.

"..."

Through the first floor window, Ryuunosuke could be seen at his desk, paying mild attention to the events going on outside, while at the other end of the spectacle...Chihiro was drinking a can of beer under a cherry blossom tree.

Although what was depicted in the painting was obviously fictional, it was definitely something that could happen at Sakurasou. The painting

allowed one to experience the atmosphere, what it felt like to live at the place itself, almost as if one were inside the realm of the painting, and although the concept was simple, it gave off a sense of warmth.

Through one painting alone, Mashiro had successfully illustrated everything important to Sakurasou.

This feeling, this feeling that threatened to overflow from within him, what words could he use to describe it?

Only one came to mind.

Although he was not completely sure as he had never used it before, he figured that it probably wasn't wrong to describe his feelings as such.

This, could only be called love. The painting was filled with love. Mashiro had directly illustrated her feelings for Sakurasou.

Previously Chihiro had said as well that Mashiro had learnt to express her feelings using art before using words and facial expressions to do so.

It was exactly as Chihiro had described it. Mashiro could do it, these were Mashiro's feelings, her gentle feelings towards Sakurasou.

Even the deepest corners of his heart were surrounded by this warmth. They were healed in a comforting, relaxing manner.

However, another even larger and opposing emotion caused Sorata's chest to throb with pain.

"What the hell is this..."

He felt as if he were going to suffocate, and his voice quivered as well. His body, no...his very soul felt as if it were being torn apart.

It was an extremely gentle work of art. But to Sorata, it was exactly

because of this that it seemed both saddening and lonely. Nanami and Misaki's expressions darkened as well. Jin and Ryuunosuke had troubled expressions on their faces, while Chihiro looked down silently.

Because, something very important was missing.

"What the hell is this!?"

An absolutely irreplaceable person was not present in the painting.

Only Mashiro was not included.

"This, it's as if..."

He was unable to put his feelings into words.

If he did it would seem too much like a confession, and that scared him.

Because he already knew that this painting was a message from Mashiro.

- Goodbye.

Even outsiders would have noticed it, Mashiro's artwork had presented her farewell in an emotional, painful manner.

Sorata turned towards Chihiro impulsively.

"Why didn't you stop Shiina!?"

"I very clearly asked her 'Have you discussed this with Kanda.'"

"- !"

"If this had happened when Mashiro had just arrived here, she might not have been able to do something like this considering that you already have so much on your plate, and would actually talk things through

with you. However, thanks to each and every one of you here, Mashiro has changed. Although under these circumstances it's for the worse."

If Mashiro had went to discuss things with him instead, what could he have done anyway? Sorata was busy preparing for the judging of his proposal, and had petitioning activities to deal with, so he definitely would have had no time to deal with anything else.

No. Wrong. Sorata had known that Mashiro had been feeling frustrated for a long time now. The reason why Mashiro had given her all with regards to the petitioning activities was because she felt responsible for Sakurasou's impending demolition. She even thought that Nanami acting tough and being stubborn was her fault as well.

His chest throbbed with pain, and it felt bitter. Just two days ago, Mashiro had come over to Sorata's room after complaining that she couldn't sleep.

Although he knew that Mashiro was in a state of suffering, in the end he was unable to think of other ways to chase away this uneasiness aside from collecting signatures to ensure Sakurasou's survival. And so over these two weeks, Sorata had did all he could using the only ways he could think of...

In the end, all he had to show for his efforts was the situation they were currently in. Saying that he was dissatisfied would be an understatement, as he had put in his all, but nothing had gone his way.

"After looking at this painting, I'm sure all of you should be able to understand. Understand what Mashiro must have been feeling when she left."

Because it was an important place, because it was a place where people important to her lived, she had decided to leave. Because if she were to stay, Sakurasou would disappear.

The painting was filled with emotions that were hard to put into words. If she had not been caring for Sakurasou from the bottom of her heart, she wouldn't have been able to produce such a piece of work.

Even a world-renowned artist wouldn't be able to produce something like this. Of course only Mashiro would be able to do it. Because it was an expression of Mashiro's inner feelings.

Now he finally realised the meaning of those words that Mashiro had said to him two nights ago...

- I will protect Sakurasou.

Now he finally understood the amount of determination and conviction it must have taken her to say those words, as well as the emotions she must have been experiencing as she said them...because she knew that if she left in the end, she would be able to protect Sakurasou.

"So, where exactly did Mashiro head off to?"

Jin asked in place of Sorata, who was completely silent.

"She said she wanted to return to Britain, but I have no idea how she's going to do that all by herself. Because she hadn't seemed to have contacted her parents nor Rita."

Chihiro's expression had "You know what I mean" written all over it.

"If that's the case..."

How could she possibly not know? Mashiro couldn't have possibly got plane tickets by herself, as she didn't even know how to take the train on her own.

"That kid acts in ridiculous ways sometimes."

Sorata's frustration escaped him, and he promptly sank into a maze of deep thought.

If this were the case...

"Which means, there's a possibility that she could still be in the area? Now that simplifies things."

Jin said to everyone present.

"I'll go find where Mashiron is!"

Sorata's gaze instinctively darted towards the clock in the dining room. It was already past eight.

"Jin-senpai and Misaki-senpai, please head to school first. It'd be bad if you were to be late for the graduation ceremony."

"Compared to that, obviously Mashiron is more important here!"

"Knowing her she might get lost and stumble in the direction of our school, so we'll have to count on you two seniors for help."

The worst case scenario would be that they fail both to find Mashiro and to arrive in time for the graduation ceremony.

"Hey now, don't tell me you're not gonna help us celebrate our graduation anymore?"

Jin quipped in his usual tone of voice.

"Don't be like that, Kouhai-kun! I've already decided to have you all celebrate with us!"

"I understand. I'll bring Shiina back with me, I'll definitely catch up."

Aside from this, his mind could not think of another conclusion to this whole situation.

"I'll head straight to the nearest station. Nanami and Akasaka, you two search any alleyways or detours along the way."

"Mm, understood."

Nanami nodded vigorously.

"Don't drag me into this."

Despite his grumblings, Ryuunosuke did not blatantly refuse to follow along.

Sorata, relieved at their replies, dashed out the front door with astonishing vigour.

Part 2

After pedalling on his tattered bike furiously for about three minutes,

Sorata arrived at the train station.

He had not spotted any traces of Mashiro along the way.

He didn't know whether she was actually at the train station or not, she could have left to heaven-knows-where long ago, since she was already gone by the time Sorata had woken up. Even the early bird Misaki had not noticed her departure, so she probably had left very early, possibly in the wee hours of the morning.

No, worrying about things like that now wouldn't solve anything.

Sorata parked his bicycle beside the train station without locking it, then dashed past the ticketing counters without buying a ticket.

"Hey!"

An astonished station attendant called out to Sorata.

"I'm sorry! I'm looking for someone!"

Sorata replied without even turning around, and he soon arrived at the platform.

He surveyed his surroundings, Mashiro was once again nowhere to be seen. Instead he saw several blue-collar workers, as well as a few people who appeared to be wearing high school uniforms. Despite all this, if Mashiro were present, he was confident that he would've spotted her easily.

She wasn't at the southern platform.

He took a closer look at the platform on the other side of the tracks. She wasn't at the front half, as for the back half...at the very end of the platform, he spotted Mashiro.

"Found you!"

During April last year...Mashiro had arrived here for the first time with a coffee-coloured suitcase in tow, which she lugged in front of her with both hands; now she looked exactly the same as she did back then, even down to the school uniform that she was dressed in.

"Shiina!"

Sorata bellowed as loudly as he could, channelling his voice through his abdomen, but it was coincidentally drowned out by a station announcement. It declared that a number-two train would be entering the station, at the platform Mashiro just happened to be standing at.

"Dammit!"

Once the alert for the passengers to stand behind the white line ended, the train would then enter the station.

"Mashiro!"

Sorata called out to her once again, but to no avail. The number-two train had entered the station, and Mashiro's figure disappeared as it did so.

Although his flustered state of mind caused his feet to defy his commands, he still managed to take off running to the other platform. He dashed up the stairs two steps, three steps at once, and he soon began to feel exhausted. However, now was not the time to be faltering, he absolutely had to catch up to Mashiro before her train left. If he were to miss it, he could say goodbye to attending the graduation ceremony as well.

Sorata passed through the corridor connecting the platforms, all the while praying that he would make it in time.

As he descended the flight of stairs leading there, he was faced with the passengers who had just got down from said train. Sorata hopped on the platform, heading in the opposite direction of the crowd.

The train doors slid shut.

Despite this, Sorata refused to give up, and he chased after the slowly leaving train, punching one of the train doors as hard as he could. His fist instantly flared up in a surge of heat, and the pain followed soon after.

Sorata ignored this completely, and he glanced at the interior of one of the slowly accelerating carriages.

He wanted to at least see Mashiro one last time.

He sprinted furiously atop the platform, chasing after the train with all his might.

However, he quickly reached the far end of the platform.

Perhaps because she had already blended into the crowd of passengers on the train, he was unable to spot Mashiro.

"Why is this happening!?"

Sorata flung his emotions that he simply could not accept at the gradually distancing locomotive.

"Why..."

Sorata half-sat, half-collapsed onto the platform floor.

Gone. Mashiro was gone. Even though nobody had wanted this to happen, even though nobody had wanted this whole incident to happen.

Sorata merely focused on regaining his breath.

Still in a state of stupor, he stood up shakily.

I'll catch up to her on the next train - Sorata thought as he trudged back towards the platform.

Then, on the platform which should have been completely devoid of any presence, he saw a person.

A girl who looked as if she were a fairy straight out of a colouring book stood there.

It was Mashiro.

She remained in the same position as Sorata had noticed her first earlier, in the exact same posture, both her hands clutching onto her briefcase, her head facing forward, shining brilliantly under the morning sun.

Had she heard Sorata's voice? No, it did not seem so. She didn't even seem to have noticed his presence.

But if that were the case, then why...

Although Sorata felt something was fishy, he ran towards Mashiro anyway.

"Shiina."

He slowed down slightly and called out to her.

"Sorata."

Sorata's footsteps immediately stopped as he heard his name being called out, as if he was tied up and unable to move. Because Mashiro's voice carried an extremely dense moist undertone, just as they were about three metres apart from each other.

"Shii...na?"

Sorata called out once again, thinking that it was simply a figment of his imagination.

"...I don't want to go."

Sorata was shocked. Mashiro had turned around to face him, with streams of tears flowing from her eyes. Sorata felt as if he had saw something that was impossible to exist in this world. Mashiro was crying. He had never imagined that Mashiro would ever be crying. It was his first time seeing her tears, which to him looked more like

porcelain figures, and they snatched away Sorata's thoughts bit by bit with each drop.

"I don't want to go."

Dripping...gently, silently falling...in the area that Mashiro was standing, rain began to pour.

"Tell me, Sorata."

The cement around her feet had already been dyed black with her tears.

"You..."

"But I must go."

"..."

His mind was still blank. All the words that he had wanted to say to her, as well as all the worried feelings that had spurred him on to chase after her, had all been blown away, and all that was left was a vast expanse of nothingness.

Mashiro's expression was not unlike her usual one, with her clear eyes as well as their gently elevated corners all betraying her apparent sadness. She looked just like the normal Mashiro, the Mashiro unable to read other's emotions; however, her tears were falling, just like rain on a sunny day. This seemingly dangerous dissonance caused Sorata's uneasiness to flare up even more.

"I have to get on the train."

"..."

"But my legs won't move."

He didn't need to ask the need for her to do so.

"I wanted to climb on so many times!"

Mashiro's voice felt forcefully exclaimed, causing it to sound off-pitch and hoarse.

"Shiina."

He was finally able to call her name.

"But!"

Mashiro's tightly clenched fists trembled slightly, as if she were trying to fight against the emotions which she could not deal with.

"It's alright, Shiina."

"I have to go."

"It's alright!"

"I clearly can't continue staying at Sakurasou."

"I already said it's alright!"

"I have to leave, but..."

No matter what Sorata said, Mashiro continued to repeat the same words as if she were under some sort of curse.

"You don't have to leave! Just continue staying with us at Sakurasou!"

"But, isn't this all my fault?"

She looked up at Sorata with her eyes filled with tears. Her tears

continued to fall, wetting the floor.

"All of this is my fault."

Only about half of what she said was comprehensible over her tears, causing Sorata to feel sorry for her.

"None of this is your fault, Shiina!"

"If I leave, you'll be able to protect Sakurasou."

"That's not true!"

"Today's the day of the graduation ceremony."

"Exactly. So shouldn't we be celebrating for Misaki-senpai and Jin-senpai?"

"But, we didn't manage to fill up the notebook!"

"You don't need to blame yourself for everything."

"No. It's all my fault."

"Who are you kidding..."

Sorata didn't want Mashiro blaming herself like that. Nobody in Sakurasou believed that any of this was Mashiro's fault.

"It's all my fault."

"Who are you trying to kid!?"

"--!"

If only he could talk about other things, if only he could put it to her

more gently. But, the current Sorata was incapable of doing those things. He could only use this method to say what he wanted to say, to deliver the message he wanted to deliver. Despite all that, it was still better than staying silent.

"You clearly don't understand anything at all!"

"I understand all too well!"

"--!"

It was Sorata's turn to flinch in shock.

"I know I've been messing up all this time! I know that it's all my fault! Be it that Sakurasou's going to disappear...or that Nanami's pushing herself way too hard! Everything single thing that happened is all my fault! I don't want to continue staying at Sakurasou if all it does is cause misery to those around me! I don't want that at all!"

"..."

Sorata was rendered completely speechless. He felt as if he had taken an unexpected blow.

"It's all my fault..."

Mashiro's tear-filled eyes shone with determination, and she stared directly at Sorata.

"It's because I'm here that all this is happening."

Mashiro was bring incredibly stubborn, and this very stubbornness appeared dangerous to Sorata. He felt as if that if he were to say anything more, she would begin to crack, and if he were to use his two hands to touch her, she would shatter. Sorata was currently imagining this impossible scenario.

However, when faced with this impractical illusion, Sorata's legs faltered instead.

"..."

He had nothing more to say.

His cornered heart had shrunk itself into a little ball. He needed to say something quickly, or else...however, faced with this Mashiro who appeared to be on the verge of crumbling, he was unable to say anything.

Just then, he heard a noise coming from behind him.

"What sort of nonsense are you spouting?"

Sorata turned to see a panting, exhausted Nanami. She placed both her hands on her knees while looking up at them both, in an attempt to regain her breath. Behind her was an equally heavily panting Ryuunosuke.

"Aoyama. Even Ryuunosuke's here..."

Nanami walked past Sorata and stood in front of Mashiro, then said:

"None of this is your fault."

"But..."

"Don't go around taking the troubles others are facing as your own."

Nanami's voice carried a certain degree of annoyance.

"..."

Mashiro seemed to have noticed it as well, and she furrowed her brow

slightly in unease.

Sorata hesitated on whether or not he should stop Nanami.

“Failing the auditions was my problem and mine alone, it belongs to me and nobody else. Not a single bit of it has to do with you, Mashiro. Because, this entire experience...belongs to me.”

“But...”

Despite Mashiro’s protests, Nanami pressed on.

“Me saying that I’m fine, as well as not listening to Kanda-san’s advice and pressing on, were all my own decisions. It has nothing to do with you, nothing at all.”

“Nanami.”

“If you insist on taking responsibility for every single little thing, I’m only going to feel annoyed.”

“...”

Mashiro sniveled, her face dirty from all the crying.

For every sentence that Nanami spoke, Sorata began to worry more and more whether Mashiro would simply crumble like this from the pressure.

“Nanami, are you angry?”

“Do you even need to ask? Do I look like I’m not angry to you?”

Mashiro’s tears which she had attempted to hold in now once again began to fall.

“Hey now, Nanami, no need to go too far.”

Sorata took a step forward.

“Kanda-san, please be quiet.”

After being called out in such a direct manner, he decided to take two steps backward instead.

“But, Mashiro.”

“What?”

“The way you worry so much about other people honestly makes me very happy.”

“Nanami...”

“Thank you so much. I’m really very happy.”

Nanami smiled warmly.

“...!”

Mashiro’s current feelings could no longer be expressed by mere words alone.

“Which is why, I can’t allow you to leave on your own.”

As if given a push from behind by those words, Mashiro ran up and hugged Nanami, burying her head in Nanami’s shoulders. Nanami gently put her arms around Mashiro.

“Taking care of you really requires a lot of effort, huh.”

“That’s because, I’m the reason why Sakurasou is going to disappear...”

“That may be the truth, but that’s just the decision made by the Board. Kanda and the ponytailed one don’t seem to care.”

Ryuunosuke who had been watching silently until then said so calmly.

“Akasaka-san is right.”

Nanami gently pat Mashiro on her back.

“But...I really don’t want to go, but I have to.”

“I just said you don’t need to leave.”

“It’s the first time that I’m doing something like this, so I don’t understand. I don’t understand what I should do...my chest hurts, it feels so uncomfortable...”

“I’m sure.”

“I just can’t help in any way...so, I...this is the only thing I can do.”

“It must hurt.”

“Mm...yeah...”

Sorata sighed in relief as he saw Mashiro beginning to calm down slowly. Nanami turned to look at him.

“W-What is it?”

“You too, Kanda-san, if you have anything to say just spit it out now, it’s fine. It’s not like she’s going to break just because she’s crying.”

“Oh, alright then.”

“You really are defenseless when faced with Mashiro’s tears.”

Nanami appeared fed up all of a sudden.

“Shiina.”

“What is it?”

Although Nanami had told him to go ahead, as he looked at Mashiro’s teary expression, he couldn’t help but think twice about the words he was going to say.

“Isn’t your stubbornness one of your stronger points? You don’t need to force yourself to do things you don’t want to now.”

“But...if I’m around, Sakurasou will disappear.”

Large drops of tears once again began dripping onto the platform.

“You still don’t understand, Shiina.”

“I understand very well...”

“You really don’t. You don’t understand a single thing about what’s going on here with Sakurasou.”

“I understand. Very. Well.”

Mashiro appeared to be genuinely ticked off now, and she puffed up her cheeks slightly.

“The Sakurasou I’m referring to isn’t that rickety old building.”

“...”

“Over there, there’s Misaki-senpai, Jin-senpai, Aoyama, Chihiro-sensei, and Akasaka...of course it’s only Sakurasou with you around too,

Shiina.”

“Sorata.”

“It’s only Sakurasou when everyone’s here.”

Saying things like that to someone face-to-face was genuinely rather embarrassing.

“...”

But, since Mashiro was looking at him so earnestly, he had no way to avert his gaze.

“I know that Misaki-senpai and Jin-senpai are going to graduate today, and they’re going to be gone very soon...but that’s necessary, so it’s alright.”

“...Mm.”

“Anyway, what I want to say is that...”

“I understand.”

“...”

Sorata looked at Mashiro questioningly.

“It’s fine. I really do understand this time.”

“Are you sure?”

“Mm...Sakurasou is only Sakurasou because everyone is around. We are Sakurasou.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

He might not have needed to say anything. But, he felt that he needed to say the things that were more important, and it would be better if someone were to explain to Mashiro more clearly. If possible, Sorata hoped that he could be the one to do so.

“Shiina, you can stay here at Sakurasou. Or, I should say, you’d better stay here!”

“Sorata.”

“Even if you say you want to leave for anywhere else, I’ll do whatever it takes to stop you. All of us will do whatever it takes to stop you.”

“Although if it’s Mashiro we’re talking about, she probably can’t go anywhere on her own anyway.”

Sorata cracked a smile at Nanami’s quip. That was true.

“You said it yourself in the beginning.”

“What?”

“You said you didn’t want to leave.”

“Yeah. I want to stay...I want to stay at Sakurasou forever.”

Mashiro hugged Nanami even more tightly, becoming even more sentimental.

“Wait a second, Mashiro, that hurts!”

“Nanami will be fine.”

Mashiro said something irresponsible.

“Say what now~~!”

Sorata laughed out loud, as that was definitely something the stubborn Mashiro would do.

“K-Kanda-san, don’t just stand there laughing, help me.”

Nanami appeared to be in pain.

“Nanami, thanks.”

“Hmm, for what?”

“Thank you for worrying about me.”

“Oh, right.”

“Thank you for telling me you’re happy with me.”

“Mm.”

“I’m very happy too...so thank you.”

“Of course I’d say those things. Because we’re friends.”

“Mm, yeah...friends.”

Mashiro once again buried her head in Nanami’s shoulder, increasing the strength in her arms as she did so.

“Uh, even if that’s the case, there’s no need to be hugging me so tightly!”

“I’m sorry for interrupting you guys while you’re having your moment, but we should be heading to school about now.”

Ryuunosuke broke his silence while looking down at his smartphone to

check the time.

“The graduation ceremony’s going to begin soon.”

Sorata looked over at the station clock.

Eight fifty-one.

The ceremony would begin at nine.

“Mashiro, we’ll have to make a break for it.”

“I know.”

Nanami grabbed onto Mashiro’s hand and began to run.

Sorata chased after them.

Ryuunosuke walked behind them leisurely instead.

“Akasaka, you’ve got to run too.”

Sorata turned back to grab Ryuunosuke’s hand.

“What! What are you doing? Kanda!”

“That’s what I should be asking you, don’t just stroll along like that!”

“I don’t go to school unless there’s lessons going on. Didn’t you know that?”

“I do know, but you have to go today no matter what! Or to be precise, I’ll drag you there no matter what!”

All of them were going to attend Misaki and Jin’s graduation ceremony, and see them off with well wishes.

They dashed up the stairs, sprinted across platform number one, and continued to run.

They ran past the ticketing counters only to see Chihiro waiting outside for them with two taxicabs at the ready.

“Sensei?”

“Get in.”

Chihiro quickly split them into two groups and stuffed them into the cabs without a word. Chihiro herself, Sorata and Ryuunosuke took the first cab, while Mashiro and Nanami got in the second.

The cabs took off instantly. Presumably because Chihiro had explained the situation to them beforehand, both cab drivers drove at breakneck speeds, obviously exceeding the speed limit.

“Here, these are your uniforms.”

Chihiro tossed a set of uniforms at Sorata from the driver’s seat.

Sorata himself had cleanly forgotten that he was still in his casual wear. Both Ryuunosuke and Nanami had changed into their school uniforms before leaving, and so had Mashiro.

Sorata twisted and turned his body in bizarre directions, all the while with his seatbelt on, and finally managed to put on his uniform.

“Sensei, if you really wanted to help us, why didn’t you just stop Shiina when she wanted to leave!”

Sorata asked as he fumbled with his tie.

“Could you please think before you speak? In this situation, there are so

many lessons to be learnt, you don't need a teacher like me to point them out for you. You all managed to stop Mashiro on your own, that means a lot. Even if you had failed earlier, it would still mean something...since, after all, humans learn by experience."

Their gazes met through the reflection in the rearview mirror, and Chihiro was wearing a smug expression that seemed to ask 'How did I do?'

"Sensei's love is really hard to comprehend."

"Now where did you learn to say embarrassing things like that?"

"Only just recently."

Or to be precise, in the past hour.

Chihiro didn't refute this claim, and she scoffed lightly instead. What was she so happy about?

As the two of them talked, the taxi had already reached the school gates. While it would take fifteen minutes to get there on foot, heading there by cab took barely five minutes.

They left Chihiro to settle the bill, after which all of them got off. Sorata put on his coat and buttoned it up.

"Two minutes left, run."

"I know that!"

Chihiro berated Sorata for this, while Sorata instead grabbed onto Mashiro who had just gotten down from the second taxicab and began to run as fast as he could.

His destination was the sports hall.

Nanami and Ryuunosuke chased after him. After a while, Chihiro began to run too, grumbling all the while.

With one minute left on the clock...at exactly eight fifty-nine a.m., Sorata and the others reached the sports hall.

Part 3

"Sorata, I'm feeling hot."

Mashiro complained with a blank expression on her face.

"Don't worry, so am I."

"Kanda-kun, I don't quite get why you said 'don't worry'."

"Don't worry, I don't know either."

Both Mashiro and Nanami looked at him rudely.

"This is too much, why is someone like me being dragged into this..."

Ryuunosuke sitting to the left of him appeared to be having difficulty breathing, and he wiped at the beads of sweat on his brow.

"It's all Kanda's fault, my muscles will definitely ache come tomorrow."

"Blame yourself for being too weak."

However, it was certainly true that they had ran quite a distance, and Sorata mentally prepared himself for what may happen tomorrow.

Just as they were engaging in their meaningless conversations, the screeching feedback from a microphone turning on assaulted their ears.

The entire sports hall went silent in an instant. Only the aura of an extremely large amount of people gathering there remained, which gave the place a thick presence that sat comfortably in the area.

At the microphone beside him, he saw Chihiro standing there. He had never heard her mentioning anything about being an MC for the ceremony, so he was rather surprised. Her hair and clothes were slightly ruffled, probably because they had ran there just a while ago. Koharu stood behind her, helping her to get her hair and clothes in order.

The time was precisely nine a.m.

Chihiro took a deep breath and said:

“The twenty-ninth ceremony for the presentation of the graduation certificates will now begin.”

It was going to begin. No, it had already began.

“May everyone present please rise.”

He felt everyone there hold their breaths.

“The graduating students will now enter the hall.”

With these words as a signal, a live musical performance from the first and second-year students in the music stream immediately began, with the sounds of their music coming at them from the front right corner of the sports hall. This transformed the silent hall into a grand, stunning spectacle; and the moving, lilting sounds of the music accented the solemnness of the occasion.

In order to welcome the graduating students, the warm sounds of clapping naturally engulfed the hall.

The graduating students were lined up by class, and they slowly walked

down the red carpet which had been laid down for them right in the middle of the hall, basking under the endlessly flashing spotlights.

Leading the students in the arts stream, was a person Sorata knew very well...Misaki. He had no idea what she was so happy about, as she was smiling brilliantly from ear to ear. No, that was just Misaki's usual self.

She wore a cherry blossom-shaped brooch on her breast. All of the graduating students were wearing them.

"Ah, right. Those."

Nanami seemed to have suddenly recalled something, and she pulled out a few identical brooches of her own from her uniform's pocket. Their individual sizes were big enough to fit snugly in her palm. She passed one each to Sorata, Mashiro and Ryuunosuke. Sorata took a closer look and noticed that all the students present were holding onto one of those.

At the very end of the graduation ceremony, there would be an activity where someone would throw flowers onto the graduating students' heads and congratulate them for leaving the school.

Following the arts stream students were the music stream students. Sorata noticed Himemiya Saori amidst the crowd, not wearing her signature headphones this time presumably due to inconvenience. Saori looked over in his direction for a second, perhaps having had sensed his gaze. She then appeared shocked for a moment, but it quickly turned into a satisfied smile. Sorata figured she must have heard something from Misaki or Jin.

After the two arts stream classes entered the hall, they were followed by the students in the normal stream.

The former student council president Tatebayashi Souichiro passed Sorata by. Jin followed suit, albeit a few students behind him. As Jin noticed Sorata and the others, the corner of his mouth turned up in a

cheerful smile.

Finally, all the classes had entered the hall. And with them, the music ended.

After the applause ceased, a tense silence once again dominated the sports hall.

Everyone took their seats once more.

“The ceremony begins.”

As the graduating students finished entering the hall, the ceremony then began to progress smoothly.

After the opening speech, they would then sing the national anthem together, then present the graduation certificates. Chihiro gave her position at the microphone away to the teachers of each class, after which a single representative from each class went on stage.

Under the attentive gazes of everyone present, the representative students received their certificates from the principal and then returned to their seats. Sorata had initially thought that the representative of the arts stream would be Misaki, so when another student went on stage instead he was slightly shocked and disappointed.

“It’s not Misaki.”

Mashiro said as well, looking rather wistful as she did so.

Representing the arts stream, Saori coolly accepted her graduation certificate. For Jin’s class the representative was Souichiro, and with his back perfectly upright he was the perfect candidate for events such as this, leaving a strong impression on everyone. Nothing less than to be expected of the former student council president.

The presenting of the graduation certificates proceeded slowly, and after it ended, the tenseness of the atmosphere decreased slightly.

Sorata listened to the principal's speech half-heartedly, and for the speech to be delivered by a guest of honor, the speaker was none other than the chairman of the Board. Sorata stared at him throughout, as he wanted to remember what he looked like. He was a bearded man, well over fifty years old. Sorata glared at him continuously from the middle of his speech onwards, while Misaki and Nanami stared at him too, both looking as if they had something to say. Only Ryuunosuke yawned in boredom, and he even closed his eyes at times to try and sleep.

The chairman's speech lasted less than five minutes, and after the guests of honor were all introduced to the students, a feeling of restlessness once again assaulted him.

Half of the events on the itinerary had already been done with, and the ceremony was slowly approaching its final moments. He suddenly felt as if the ceremony was proceeding at a faster pace than before.

After the congratulatory messages, it was time for the current students to deliver farewell speeches. The current student council president, a second-year student was called up on stage, and he began to move forward.

His slow and clear voice began to describe his memories with the graduating students. During the orientation, his first time meeting his seniors...joining clubs and societies together, working and sweating together...receiving guidance from them whilst living alongside them in the dormitories...boosting the atmosphere during the sports and cultural festivals...the student council president described all these in a voice that was slowly becoming emotional.

Although their respective memories were different, Sorata felt himself relating to his experiences.

The thoughts that surfaced in his mind were those of the days he spent in Sakurasou. The 「First time」 that Sorata recalled was not that of the school entrance ceremony nor the orientation, but instead the day he first went to Sakurasou.

It was a certain summer day in his first year of attending school there, the day the school found out he was keeping a cat, Hikari, and he had been called to the principal's office and expelled from the regular dormitories. He had felt extremely uneasy, as he wondered whether or not he could survive in Sakurasou which had been labelled by the other students as the hive of problem students.

Then, on his very first day there, one could say that he had experienced things that made him even more uneasy. He had first thought that although he may be going to Sakurasou, the residents there would at least be human, but in the end the first one he had encountered was an alien. He had believed strongly that the supervising teacher there would be serious, but she was an incredibly troublesome person, not to be trusted at all. Furthermore, he had been mistaken for a ghost by resident hikikomori Ryuunosuke, it was all just terrible. Even Jin, who would nonchalantly return only the next morning after disappearing for the night was comparatively normal.

Although he could now look back at those memories with a smile, back then he had honestly thought to himself 'It'll be hell if I continue to stay here', and had been thinking nothing but of ways to leave Sakurasou.

After that, a lot of things happened. Both good and bad. To Sorata, the days he spent in Suiko were equivalent to the days he spent in Sakurasou.

And through it all, Misaki was always there, Jin was always there, Ryuunosuke was always there, and Mashiro and Nanami were always there. Not to mention Chihiro too.

It was because of everyone else that he was able to fall in love with

Sakurasou that he had so hated. By the time he came to his senses, he realized that he wouldn't rather be anywhere else.

Those nostalgic days that they had stored away in scrapbooks and photo albums surfaced in his memory only to disappear once more, causing tears to well up in Sorata's eyes, and he felt a sour sensation in the back of his nose.

Sounds of crying came from around him as well.

The student representative's moving farewell speech, ended with the promise 'The Suiko spirit that we've inherited from all of you seniors, we'll definitely continue to protect it'.

This sentence pierced Sorata's chest painfully.

Sorata and the others were unable to protect it.

They were unable to protect Sakurasou.

The student council president finished his speech and returned to his seat.

At this exact moment, Sorata felt his hand come into contact with something. It was warm to the touch. Mashiro who was sitting beside him had grasped onto his hand, her eyes facing forward.

In Sorata's opinion, it was a wordless protest that said 'We can't let the ceremony end'.

Mashiro's other hand clasped onto Nanami's hand. Nanami was rubbing her eyes to mask the tears that trickled out of their corners.

"Now, a representative from the graduating students will be delivering a speech."

Chihiro announced through the microphone. There weren't many items left on the itinerary, as after this speech ended, it would be followed by the presenting of souvenirs and memorabilia, then they would sing the graduation song, then the school song, then the closing speech, then it would be all over.

Just as this thought flashed through Sorata's mind –

His long-repressed feelings burst into his head in an instant, spewing fire just like molten lava.

- No.

His entire body roared and pleaded for this not to end.

No, it wasn't a roar, it was a wail.

Nanami was unable to hide the tears that gushed from eyes, and she clenched her teeth, unable to endure nor swallow her hatred.

Even Ryuunosuke looked serious for once.

Mashiro was grabbing his hand tightly.

It couldn't just end like this. Sakurasou's final moments couldn't come to pass like this, 「Sakurasou's Spirit」 wasn't something as feeble as that.

Previously, Sorata had told Ryuunosuke that, regardless of the outcome, he wouldn't even mind carrying out petitioning activities with everyone else being his final memories. Sorata had believed in this feeling, and he had genuinely hoped that it would be sufficient. However, in this instant, all those turned into lies.

How could he be fine with something like this?

After that, Sorata's body was engulfed and driven by feelings of bitter

dissatisfaction, and he almost stood up on impulse.

In this very instant...

“Farewell speech, student representative, Kamiigusa Misaki.”

As he heard this voice...

Sorata and Nanami both looked up with expressions of disbelief on their faces, while Mashiro blinked her eyes repeatedly. Faced with this unexpected turn of events, even Ryuunosuke looked forward to confirm what he had heard.

“Yes.”

Not long after, Misaki’s cheerful voice echoed around the sports hall.

They had not misheard. What exactly was going on? Sorata’s body plunked itself back on his seat.

He had believed up until now that the speech would be delivered by the former student council president, Tatebayashi Souichiro. He even remembered Souichiro mentioning that he needed to attend a meeting with regards to the speech when he had bumped into him in school.

It appeared that they were not the only ones who had made the same assumptions, and the hall was suddenly alive with commotion.

The hall had become noticeably noisier, with everyone becoming restless.

From about three rows ahead of them, Nanami’s good friend Takasaki Mayu looked at another friend of hers, Honjou Yayoi with a look that seemed to say ‘What exactly is going on?’ Yayoi turned around in order to search for Nanami’s face in the crowd, in an attempt to answer this question. Nanami looked back at her, replying with a message that simply said ‘No idea’.

Sorata noticed that, somewhere along the gazes of the two girls, there sat a male student with a crew cut, and that person was his roommate back when he still stayed in the normal dormitories, Miyahara Daichi. His expression was somewhat puzzled, and he looked at Sorata questioningly.

Sorata shook his head to indicate 'I don't know'. After which, Daichi immediately mouthed the words 'I understand', then turned around again.

The ones who displayed the most irritation at this were the teachers standing at both sides of the sports hall. They whispered amongst themselves, discussing whether or not they should stop Misaki. However, considering that many honored guests and parents were attending the ceremony as well, they presumed that she wouldn't be able to disrupt the ceremony even if she tried.

Completely ignoring the tense atmosphere around her, Misaki skipped up to the podium prepared at the very front of the stage and turned to face everyone present in the hall, with a serious expression on her face.

She pulled out a piece of paper from her pocket with her script written on it.

The sounds of the paper unfolding were picked up by the microphone. Misaki stretched her arms out in front of her, holding up the script before her face.

The commotion all around soon ceased, and the graduation ceremony had reached its tensest point.

With this atmosphere surrounding her, Misaki spoke her first sentence:

"We're once again at the season where we patiently look forward to the still-hibernating cherry blossoms to, as though they have received a

warm invitation from the spring, slowly expand and bloom. On this beautiful day where even the pores of our skin are able to sense the new season approaching, we third-year students will be graduating together. To all our esteemed guests, all the parents who have taken the time to attend this ceremony, I offer my sincerest thanks for allowing us to organize such a grand event. On behalf of each and every one of the graduating students, I thank you.”

This opening line spoken over the collectively held breaths over every single person in the hall, was refined and graceful even, completely unlike something Misaki would usually say. Even the way she spoke as well as her emotions appeared to be more controlled, much more mature than her usual ways. The teachers that were all panicky just a moment earlier had begun to calm down slowly, and some of them even outright sighed in relief.

At the end of the row that Sorata was sitting at, Chihiro who probably had some idea of what was going on listened to Misaki’s speech with her eyes closed, completely ignoring Koharu who sat besides her, attempting to get some information regarding all this. The teacher from the nurse’s office, Sayoko Hasuda, stood with both arms crossed in front of her chest instead, silently watching the events progress.

“Time flies, and before we know it we’re already graduating. Although I would love to stay for another year, when I requested a certain teacher to allow me to retain just a few days ago, I was flatly rejected and told that I absolutely must graduate. I regret this deeply from the very bottom of my heart.”

Laughter spread amongst the students.

Even though it wasn’t exactly something to be laughed at...because Misaki had actually talked about it with Chihiro. The teachers who had all just began to relax suddenly tensed up once again.

“The first time I entered the gates of Suiko was three years ago, back

when I was still a middle-school student. It was thanks to the recommendation of one of my teachers from middle school that I learnt of the existence of the High School Affiliated with Suimei University of the Arts.”

Sounds of commotion were already beginning to gently spread amongst the crowd of parents who probably did not know the exact details of the situation. Although it was still faint, Sorata could somewhat sense that this atmosphere had not been planned beforehand.

“The reason why I decided to enroll in Suiko, was because I wanted to make friends here.”

He had heard Jin mention this before. Misaki, being unable to read moods, expressions and the like, had used to be ostracized due to being too outstanding in groups...

“Back when I was in middle school, I didn’t have anyone who I could consider a friend. However, if I were to enroll in this school...in Suiko, there was a possibility that I might find one – that was what that teacher of mine told me.”

Sorata sensed that the commotion was slowly dying down. Despite the fact that her expression seemed slightly playful, Misaki’s expression and voice as she read from her script was completely serious, without the slightest hint of a joke, and it was the very first time that Sorata had seen her with such an expression on her face.

“When I received my certificate of acceptance, I was so happy that I practically tore it to pieces. The feat of passing the test alone felt almost as if I had already made a friend.”

Misaki must have crumpled the paper so hard it became all creased in her excitement. Sorata could even imagine Jin saying “What are you doing” while helping her unfold it.

“Three years passed after that, a far from short but precious period of time I spent in Suiko. Now, I can honestly say that getting into this school was the best thing that could ever happen to me.”

Everyone present was listening to Misaki intently, with all their attentions focused on a single point. Sorata, Mashiro, Nanami, Ryuunosuke, the second-year students, the first-year students, the graduating students as well as the teachers were all staring at her. Even the special guests and the parents of the graduating students had their gazes fixed straight ahead of them.

“Throughout these three years, I made some very important friends, and had many precious encounters. These friends of mine have been through fun times with me, when we were sad we relied on each other, and they even put up with the times when I felt like crying. Today, the reason why I’m able to celebrate my graduation with such pleasant and cheerful feelings, is none other than the friends that I met in Suiko. The fact that we all entered Suiko during the same period, and the years we all spent together, I have no clue whether it’s due to fate or just chance. However, there is one thing that I am very sure of.”

At this moment, Misaki looked up from her script, and stared directly at Sorata and the others.

She appeared to smile faintly. But then, her gaze returned to her script just as quickly.

“I am very sure...that the thing that allowed us to meet, is the student dormitory named Sakurasou.”

Misaki said with her chest puffed out, her voice brimming with pride from the very bottom of her heart. Her words, her tone, as well as her shy expression...indicated this.

The teachers immediately furrowed their brows as they heard Sakurasou’s name being mentioned. On the other hand, the graduating

students as well as the other students patiently waited for Misaki to continue her speech, without any sounds of laughter nor commotion coming from them. This was all probably due to Misaki's pleasurable attitude.

"I was chased out of the normal dormitories just one week after I began attending school, and I moved into Sakurasou alone."

Mashiro grabbed Sorata's hand even tighter than before, to the point where it almost hurt. However, in that very situation it felt almost comforting, as they both felt that their hearts were connected.

"At first, only two people were staying in Sakurasou, the supervising teacher Chihiro-sensei and I, and it was a pitiful, sad place."

Nanami mumbled 'I see' softly in a slightly nasal voice. Sorata had not known about it as well, and as he imagined how the situation must have been like with only two people around, he began to actually feel lonely as well. That was because now all the rooms were occupied, and the perpetual noisiness that was a result of this had become completely normal to him...but, that was not the case when it all started.

Back then, what exactly was Misaki feeling? She had come to Suiko to find friends, but had been exiled to Sakurasou immediately.

"On my first night in Sakurasou...I looked through all the empty rooms there one by one, and began to weave a dream. I dreamt of there being a day where all the rooms of Sakurasou would be filled with people, and that laughter-filled days would come to this lonely place."

He gently closed his eyes, and an image of Misaki cleaning up the empty rooms alone appeared in his mind. In order to allow for anyone to move in at any time, she cleaned the rooms until not a speck of dust remained. Sorata's room had received the same treatment as well, and although the building was old, his room was incredibly clean.

“In the end, Jin who was in the same grade as me moved in as well.”

Misaki’s eyes were no longer fixated upon the script she held before her. It was almost as if she was staring into her memories, exploring the vast expanse of words that slumbered within her heart, weaving her emotions and feelings.

“When I entered my second year here, my junior a year younger than me, Dragon, as well as Kouhai-kun made Sakurasou lively again.”

The person who had truly made Sakurasou lively was Misaki. Misaki was the sun of Sakurasou, as she constantly lit up the place with her dazzling smile. It was because of that that Sakurasou was happy, their smiles never ceased, and neither did the sounds of their laughter.

Sorata had never knew that Misaki had thought this way. But, it made him happy. There was nothing that would make anyone happier than being as powerful as the sun. Misaki’s emotions pierced his chest, and tears began to leak out of the corners of his eyes. He could no longer resist the sour sensation at the back of his nose, with him giving in being just a matter of time.

“Happy times came to me every single day, with Kouhai-kun always listening to everything I have to say, and staying up with me all night to play video games. No matter how much I set him going round in circles, he never left my side, and never once took his eyes off me. Even though Jin has always been telling me to restrain myself, I’m afraid I simply can’t do it. With such happy feelings surfacing naturally every single day, how could I possibly hold them in? Because times like those were what I was hoping for all this time.”

Sorata’s vision began to blur, he could no longer hold it in.

“In the mornings, I say ‘Good morning’, when I return home I say ‘I’m back’. When someone else returns home I greet them with ‘Welcome back’. Days like these honestly made me very happy.”

He had never imagined that such small details could bring about such fond memories within his mind. He had never knew that simple greetings meant so much to Misaki.

“After school we would by the shopping district to go grocery shopping, then prepare dinner together, eating whilst chatting with each other, even fighting each other over the side dishes was fun.”

Sorata thought to himself ‘There was never any fighting amongst each other, just one-sided thievery.’ Even as he sniffled, he couldn’t help but begin to chuckle.

“Even cleaning up the bathroom and clearing the weeds in the garden...every single moment that I spent with everyone is absolutely irreplaceable to me.”

The person that made their days shine so brightly was clearly Misaki herself. Sorata and the others were just keeping up with her pace...

“For always giving you guys so much trouble, I want to apologize to all of you. I’m sorry.”

She had nothing to apologize for.

It was because Misaki was around that he was able to run with all his might.

It was because Jin was around that he was able to calmly sprint forward without caring about the consequences.

“With just Chihiro, Jin, Dragon and Kouhai-kun around, it was enough to make me feel so happy that it was almost scary, but unexpectedly, Mashiron arrived too in my third year. Nanamin arrived too during the summer.

Nanami pursed her lips and stared at Misaki, attempting to permanently brand her image in her mind. However, Sorata wasn't sure whether it was possible for her to do so with her tear-filled eyes.

"I really felt happy. Because on that day...the dream that I wove on the day I came to Sakurasou, was finally realized in the summer of my third year here."

All six rooms were occupied, and Sakurasou was filled with sounds of laughter.

Even Sorata could no longer see what was ahead of him clearly, and Mashiro's eyes were tearing up as well.

Ryuunosuke who stared straight ahead of him sniffled slightly.

It didn't end there.

Sobs could be heard coming from the ranks of the graduating students. Where the music stream students sat, Saori used a handkerchief to wipe off her tears. Even a female student beside her whom Sorata didn't know had her shoulders trembling, presumably because she had brought Misaki's words into her own memories.

"Every time another person moved into Sakurasou, the hole in my heart slowly filled. Beyond that, my heart began to grow warmer as well, and the happy days we spent caused me to smile naturally. Those were the times we spent."

Misaki's words engulfed the entire hall just like the sunlight on a spring day.

"Many people said I was cheerful, said I was energetic, said I was noisy. However, the reason why I was able to be like that was because of you all."

Nanami let out a sob.

“To me, all of you are the greatest gifts I could possibly have received.”

Sorata was unable to resist his overflowing emotions.

“Do you still remember? The first time you all arrived at Sakurasou. Those days, to me, are precious, unforgettable ones where I first met with you all.”

Of course, how could they have forgotten? How could they ever possibly forget?

Back then, for whatever reason, Misaki was in the wardrobe in his room, and she had mistaken Sorata for a burglar.

“When Nanamin moved in, I personally carried your luggages to Sakurasou from the normal dormitories, which gave you a huge fright. I did that because I was unable to wait any longer once I thought of all the rooms being filled up with people. From a long time before that, I had already felt that it would be great if you were the one staying there, Nanamin.”

Nanami nodded whilst crying.

“Every single moment that I spent there are precious treasures to me. Even if one day had nothing particularly special happening on it, that day would still remain as an unforgettable memory.”

This applied to Sorata as well. To everyone.

“Especially this last year, so many things have happened that made me think I was dreaming.”

He didn't want to move his increasingly blurred and hazy gaze off of Misaki.

“A new friend came to join us during the springtime, who was none other than the already world-renowned artist Mashiron. I love Mashiron’s eyes, I fell in love with them at first sight. At first Mashiron would always look at me like she would look at others. No matter whatever time it was, she would always look at me the way she would look at others.”

“Misaki.” Mashiro called out her name in a small voice.

“In the summer, in order to organize Nanamin’s welcoming party, we snuck into the school’s swimming pool at night. We changed into our swimsuits and played around, and even ate our Sakurasou signature hotpot by the poolside. In the end we were spotted by a guard, which led us to hurriedly make our escape. I was the fastest to run, while everyone else caught up to me.”

A bitter smile appeared on Nanami’s tear-stained face, probably because she remembered her panty-less sprint. Sorata smiled as well.

“On the way back from the swimming pool, the beautiful starry sky we all looked up together and saw branded itself distinctly in my memory.”

Sorata closed his eyes and immediately remembered it. The starry skies of the approaching autumn, on the day where they felt as if they could go anywhere they wanted...half a year after that, Sorata and the others found themselves where they were now. Although a lot of things had happened since then, they had finally reached this moment.

“We even set off some fireworks at the backyard of Sakurasou when summer ended.”

Bitter memories pierced his chest. That was the day he had received the results of his first attempt at the ‘Let’s Make a Game’ proposal judging competition. Sorata, who had been unable to perform at all and had merely been crushed by the other teams, was welcomed warmly by

everyone else in Sakurasou as he returned. After that they played around with fireworks, which allowed Sorata to forget his pain. It was because the usual Misaki and Jin were around that Sorata was able to return to his usual self.

Maybe all they did was stay around each other. But, it was because they were together that their souls had slowly began to merge.

Although they may not have noticed it, just the act of them existing there together allowed them to become the strength that allowed each one of them to move on.

(Illustration here)

Even though their individual memories were different, Misaki's words were able to resonate amongst all the students present. Any of them who have had experienced dormitory life would have had situations where they collaborated with their seniors or juniors, and any of them who have had participated in club activities who have had experienced times where they were treated either kindly or strictly by their seniors. Sorata looked in front of him and saw a female first-year student burying her head in a handkerchief, and diagonally behind her a male student was trying his best to hide his tears. Mashiro's classmate Fukatani Shiho began to cry as well, being influenced by the female student sitting beside her.

Both the graduating and still enrolled students remembered their individual glory days, they immersed themselves in the days where they had previously shone. It was because those days were over that they remembered them so fondly; it was because they could not travel back in time that they felt especially sad that they were gone...every single person there recalled that they had experienced such precious moments as well.

"During the cultural festival in the autumn, we created and submitted our own product. 「Milky Way Cat Nyanboron」 was the first time I've

collaborated to make something with others, and it's also my best attempt at doing it. My friends at Sakurasou allowed me to do something I had always wanted to do, and they also allowed me to experience the joy of what it was like to work alongside others."

That honestly made them happy. Sorata had experienced the joy of creating something in an unprecedented yet greatest possible way, and he had also shared the happiness of doing so with his friends. The furor and excitement of the audience had caused Sorata's body to tremble in excitement. It was because he had learnt of that thrill...that he had that bit of experience, so even if his current situation was not all too successful, he was able to continuously generate the urge to try again, so as to once again experience that passionate feeling. That really was his greatest moment...Sorata who wanted once again to work with Mashiro and Misaki had this dream.

However, leaving all that aside for now, the fact that they had produced something for the cultural festival was by itself enough to make them feel happy.

The meetings they had carried out on the roof during recess periods had been incredibly lively every single time.

Although others might call them too cheerful, even when their predictions messed up which caused them to be behind on schedule, they all felt as if there would be a way if they just had each other.

They all seemed to be staying up late during the last days of the whole thing, and everyone's spirits seemed to be unusually high.

Difficult things made them happy, and their busyness turned into infinite energy.

It was because of that that he wanted to do something else with these other members, to continue to create without stopping. Because they had experienced happiness so intense that they didn't want to ever stop

feeling it.

These memories were etched in the hearts of every single one of them, which made him happy. Experiencing the same moments together, the same feelings as well as the same emotions were enough to make him happy. These were memories that belonged not to Sorata alone, but to all the others as well.

“During the winter, there were times where we had clashes with each other which caused the situation between us to become awkward. It wasn’t that we never had any arguments or fights before, we did have moments where either we felt unhappy or we caused others to feel unhappy. We also had moments where we felt pain at things not going our way, which lead to times where we wanted to run away or attempt to simply not care about those things.”

Yes, she was absolutely correct. Behind those happy days were painful ones, as painful as they were happy. Sometimes he would hate himself due to his own insignificance, while at other times he would think that his existence was tragic as he had nothing that he wanted to do. And at other times he would even question himself on whether or not he could achieve his goal and fall into a spiral of uneasiness...all these things happened frequently.

But at these moments, Jin would always nonchalantly have a chat with Sorata, where sometimes he would be solemn, at other times he would intentionally give him harsh yet useful advice, and at other times he had even confided in Sorata that he thought he was a useless person.

Misaki on the other hand would send the dispirited Sorata going round and round in circles, sharing some of her energy with him.

“However, after those unhappy days passed, today finally arrived. Not every day is a sunny day, and I personally believe that it is because rainy days exist that these tiny seeds of emotions can take root and bloom into flowers that bring about new relationships. We hurt each other because

we are not yet matured, and so we can also forgive each other. So what I've went through in this school...in Sakurasou, are all irreplaceable and indispensable experiences."

Even though Misaki was still talking about Sakurasou, everyone had already ceased being shaken. The hall was engulfed in an atmosphere where everyone within it wanted to listen to the remainder of Misaki's speech, with the teachers being no exception to this.

His chest felt hot, his eyelids felt hot, and even his heart was slowly beginning to heat up.

Sorata had already completely surrendered himself to this feeling that reverberated throughout his entire body.

There was no need for him to hide it, crying was not something to be ashamed of, it wouldn't even matter to him now if all his honest thoughts were laid bare for all to see.

So, he would listen to the end.

He would listen without missing a single bit of it, he would accept and engrave it with his body and soul...

Misaki's final message.

"As I celebrate our graduation today, there is only one feeling that fills my heart. I wish to offer my sincerest thanks to all the things that I've encountered here. I wish to thank all the students in Suiko, all the teachers that have supported Suiko this far, all the people that have stayed here...all the things related to me...please let me thank all of you."

Be it every single sentence that they had once spoken to each other, or every single minute or second that they had spent together, it would be impossible for him to remember all of that perfectly, there would definitely be things he would miss out. Maybe he would forget a lot of

those things the very next day, those extremely minor things. Because, we were once together every day.

“Lastly, to all the best of friends that I’ve encountered in Sakurasou, I wish to dedicate these words to you.”

These extremely minor things slowly piled upon each other day by day.

“Thank you for accompanying me all this time! I cannot thank you enough.”

It was then that a meteor shower of memories trickled down from Sorata’s face, beautifully descending onto the ground.

Sorata’s tears fell onto the carpeted floor of the sports hall.

“So, I don’t need words of blessing. I’ve already received so, so many blessings from everyone in Sakurasou, so many that I can’t even carry them all with both my arms! Today, I carry all these overflowing blessings with me, and graduate from Suiko!”

At this point, even Misaki choked in a sob. The sounds of her sniffing resounded about the hall through the microphone.

After about ten seconds of complete silenced.

Is it over already – just as this thought flashed through his mind, Misaki once again raised her head, and spoke forcefully to the entire hall:

“Now, Sakurasou is facing the threat of being demolished.”

She spoke as if using her very last bit of strength.

“Please don’t destroy my...our most precious Sakurasou! Please everyone, I beg of you to please lend us your strength!”

Misaki lowered her head slowly, her face dirty with tears.

Sorata searched for Jin out of the corner of his eye. Since he was tall, he would be fairly easy to spot even in a crowd. His eyes soon meet with Jin who was surveying his surrounding as well. He was smiling, his eyes were smiling, he had been smiling from beginning to end. It was then that Sorata finally understood. This script had been prepared by the two of them together...

Sorata felt nothing but respect for the two, he could not possibly pick this skill up from them. Nothing less than to be expected of Misaki and Jin, Sorata's two most loved seniors.

They had saved everything in such a short time, and redeemed themselves.

The regret that Sorata had felt at the very last day of their petitioning activities for not being able to do anything...or the pain they all felt as their activities achieved no results...or even Nanami's scars that she herself had made worse by attempting to endure...and even Mashiro's feelings that had forced herself into a corner for believing that Sakurasou's impending demolition was her fault...

Not to mention Sorata's unwillingness to accept what had happened despite deciding to attend the graduation ceremony, all those things had achieved redemption...

They had proudly used unconventional methods to save everything that mattered. They had been forgiven, they had been seen as having done nothing wrong, they had received confirmation that all those days they had spent were not meaningless after all...in the end this meaning had gently enveloped Sorata and the others in typical Sakurasou fashion.

The one who should really be thankful was Sorata.

It was because Sakurasou had Misaki and Jin residing in it...that he was

able to have such an amazing high school life. It may have been messy and chaotic, but it was because of that that he was able to experience all sorts of feelings. It was exactly because he had been dragged into so many troublesome affairs that he had been able to laugh to his heart's content, to cry to his heart's content, to sigh sorrowfully to his heart's content, but yet still claim proudly that he had experienced happier days than anyone else, where every single day made him want to brag loudly to everyone else about them.

At the same time, he was able to strive towards his goal.

"Please lend us your strength."

Until the very end, Misaki and Jin had refused to give up, and they swore to protect Sakurasou. Just like they were protecting Sorata and their other juniors at this very moment.

It was just wonderful. To have been able to go through high school with such amazing seniors, the only thing Sorata could describe it as was wonderful.

"Enough is enough!"

It was then that the principal interrupted her speech, his face a virulent shade of red.

"Don't be so stubborn, return to your seat."

"This isn't being stubborn."

The person who immediately came to back her up was none other than Jin, and he had already walked up to Misaki's side.

"I'm sure you know her name as well, esteemed principal."

Jin's tone was steady and calm throughout.

“Of course.”

“Not just you, I’m sure, but the entire school probably knows who she is as well.”

Jin spoke almost as if he was talking to himself.

“So what?”

“If so, I’m sure you should know about what I’m going to tell you, principal.”

Jin goaded, being a truly talented actor.

“This speech would normally have been conducted by a representative, the student with the highest academic results in that grade.”

The principal’s expression visibly changed.

“If I remember correctly, the reason why last year’s student council president had made the speech instead was because that representative turned down the opportunity, or it could have been that said student council president was that representative.”

“Even if that’s true, nobody gave you the permission to deliver the speech yourselves.”

“But, haven’t we already submitted our script for review? This morning, the previous student council president Tatebayashi Souichiro should have mentioned it to you, right?”

“What!?”

The principal looked over at the dean to confirm this.

“Considering how important the script for such an event is, I’m sure you couldn’t have not bothered looking through it since it would be too troublesome, right?”

The dean looked away in embarrassment.

“A-Anyway, who cares about your reasons, what exactly do you both think this ceremony is, huh!?”

“An important stage for us graduating students, right?”

At Jin’s intentionally inflammatory reply, the principal finally reached the end of his rope, and gave a signal to the teachers beside him. The male teachers immediately dashed forward to try and stop Misaki and Jin. However, before they could get their hands on Misaki, Jin stood in their way to stop them.

Jin was immediately restrained.

Misaki used the time that Jin had bought for her and vaulted speedily over the podium and ran off. The other teachers chased after her.

At this rate, Misaki will be caught as well.

As this thought flashed through Sorata’s mind, his body immediately began to move, and he wiped off his tears forcefully using his uniform’s sleeves, completely ignoring the fact that they would be dirtied. He made his way out of the ranks of the students, and jumped onto the red carpet that ran through the center of the hall.

He then yelled out as loudly as he could, channeling his voice through his diaphragm:

“The ones who should be thankful, is us!”

In that instant, it felt as if time had stopped. The graduating students,

the other students, the members of the staff, the parents, the honored guests...the attention of everyone present was now fixed upon Sorata. But, who cares?

Sorata knew he didn't.

"It was because our seniors accepted us, the students who could not fit in at the normal dormitories, with such warmth that we're able to stand where we are now!"

"Shut it, Kanda."

A male teacher approached from behind to stop him.

"HOW COULD I POSSIBLY DO THAT!?"

Sorata yelled him. The teacher had visibly been caught off guard, but despite this, another teacher came forward to help as well, and he was quickly restrained by the combined strength of the two.

However, Sorata was not planning to shut up just like that.

His body was now acting on instinct alone.

"We who were chased out of the normal dormitories...we who were nervous as we didn't know what lay before us in the future, it was our seniors who welcomed us into Sakurasou, a place that we could call home!"

Even if his voice were to become hoarse, he knew that he absolutely had to express these feelings of his.

"There, we didn't have to face not being able to fit in with everyone else! We weren't lonely anymore! We laughed together, we cried together...although we may be different from all the other students, it was because of our seniors that we were able to experience the absolute

best years in high school!”

“You’d better shut it this time.”

Sorata’s head was forcefully pressed onto the floor, and he was finally unable to let out any sound.

“Argh!”

He could only let out primal, beastlike shouts that made no sense whatsoever, which annoyed him to no end.

“No matter what would happen, our seniors would always jump to our side to help us. When we felt hesitant, they would always act on their own first then drag us along! Even today, they didn’t even tell us that they were going to do something like this!”

The person who yelled out in this manner was Nanami. Her voice echoed throughout the entire sports hall, and everyone present could hear her loud and clear.

Sorata was happy, since Nanami had helped him say the things he had wanted to say.

He couldn’t stop them. He couldn’t stop his brimming, overflowing emotions.

Nanami’s arm was grabbed by a teacher who was trying frantically to stop her.

Sorata mustered all the strength he had left, and managed to raise his head.

At the very corner of his vision he saw a pair of pale, slender legs. Sorata knew those legs. They belonged to Mashiro.

“I like Sakurasou.”

Although her voice was far from loud, the determination it carried allowed it to spread throughout the hall.

“Don’t take Sakurasou away from us.”

It seemed as if that even the teachers were afraid of laying a hand on Mashiro. Because if she were to be injured, they would be the ones in hot soup instead.

The hall once again fell silent.

A certain someone used this opportunity to speak.

“Say it already, Kanda!”

A voice that cut across the silence. A voice he knew.

“I’m sure Sakurasou won’t be defeated just like this!”

It was Miyahara Daichi’s voice.

“Nanami, keep fighting!”

Yayoi and Mayu’s voices cried out soon after.

“Shiina-san, go!”

This time the entire second-year arts stream class called out, with Shiho leading them.

One of the teachers berated them all loudly, telling them to keep quiet.

However, this only achieved the opposite.

“Go, Sakurasou!”

“Sakurasou, well done!”

“Please keep fighting!”

“This is the true Sakurasou!”

Voices began to call out one after another. These voices came from the graduating students, the currently enrolled students, the second-year students, the first-year students, male students and female students alike.

Sorata surveyed his surroundings even as he was being restrained. Both to the left and right of him were familiar faces. All of them he had gotten to know only over the past two weeks.

Sorata and the others had not managed to collect the signatures of two-thirds of the student body, but they did manage to collect about four hundred of them...and now those four hundred were giving them the strength to move on.

They all clapped out a beat, chanting a crude ‘Sakurasou Cheer’.

The activities they had carried out over the past two weeks had not gone to waste, and the feelings that Sorata and the others had attempted to convey had been successfully conveyed as well, namely their hopes for Sakurasou to live on and their determined emotions.

Sorata began to cry tears that carried a different meaning from before. Those tears were warm tears, just as warm as the human heart.

He had nothing to be afraid of.

“Finish what you have to say! Sorata!”

Daichi’s words seemed to give Sorata a push from behind, and he

managed to stand up, overcoming the strength of the teachers pinning him down.

He then drew oxygen into his lungs powerfully.

Then, he shouted once again, this time as though he were making a declaration:

“We want to continue being with our seniors! We want to continue doing all sorts of stupid things with each other! We have so, so many things that we still haven’t done!”

The cheering all around them stopped.

“Kouhai-kun!”

Misaki jumped off the stage and dashed straight towards him.

“We can’t repay what you’ve done for us no matter what we do! We’ve always been under your care, but we have nothing to repay you with! Please don’t thank us! To be honest I don’t want you both to graduate! I want to stay with you both for the rest of the days I have here!”

He didn’t care if he looked silly, he just wanted to express all the feelings he held within him, and he didn’t care how he would do so.

Misaki ran over to him, and stopped right before his eyes. She had finally been caught by the pursuing P.E. teacher.

“Don’t worry.”

Despite the fact that she was being restrained from behind, her voice remained gentle.

“Because all of you still have one whole year left in high school.”

She then smiled cheerfully.

“But, both of you won’t be around with us anymore!”

Sorata’s face was now completely dirtied with tears and mucus.

“That’s why, you all have to spend such amazing times with your eventual juniors as well that won’t lose out to the times you’ve spent with us, an absolute best year!”

Everyone present held their breaths, and they stared at the residents of Sakurasou.

“The things that we weren’t able to do, that we haven’t had the chance to do, be sure to do them with your juniors!”

“Senpai...”

“Kamiigusa-senpai.”

“Misaki...”

Nanami and Mashiro were sobbing as well.

“That’s why, you all can’t be crying!”

Misaki pointed at them and said.

“I’ll be cheering for you juniors! I’ll be cheering for all of you! I’ll be cheering for Sakurasou!”

Since Misaki had said so, they had to do it.

“Why aren’t you replying?”

Misaki asked even as she was being dragged away by the teacher.

“Yes...”

They finally managed to speak, albeit with some difficulty.

“Put your backs into it!”

Sorata looked at Mashiro and Nanami. The three of them nodded at once, then replied passionately, from the bottom of their hearts:

“YES!”

It was then that Sorata was once again restrained on the floor.

“Ah!”

His lungs had received a blow, causing him to let out a strange noise. Although Misaki seemed to be struggling as well, her opponents were five teachers, so she wouldn't be escaping anytime soon.

The commotion in the hall had finally been stopped, and everything gradually grew calm. However, the tenseness that had been present at the beginning of the ceremony was now gone.

The atmosphere in the hall now was one of disappointment. Nobody spoke a word. It was impossible for things to return to their original states now.

“Really now.”

In this somewhat awkward atmosphere, someone spoke.

He heard sounds of footsteps approaching. Sorata managed to turn around even as he was being restrained, and he noticed Ryuunosuke walking down the red carpet with an absolutely annoyed look on his face, slowly approaching him with every step he took.

“This world really is full of idiots no matter where you go.”

“Akasaka.”

“What was that?”

The P.E. teacher instantly attempted to grab him.

“It’s exactly because of this that I keep saying that your classes aren’t worth listening to.”

Ryuunosuke remained absolutely fearless, and said this frankly in his usual cocky tone.

Sorata could almost feel that teacher’s blood surging to his head.

“Do you still not get it? Learn to read the situation. Everyone here now is on our side.”

The teacher stopped in his tracks and surveyed his surroundings.

Just as Ryuunosuke had said, even some of the honored guests and the parents were staring coldly at the teachers who had used force to handle the situation.

The teacher choked slightly and began to whimper under his breath.

“I’m sure you teachers should admit it by now?”

The person who said this was someone nobody had expected to make an appearance, and he walked out of the crowds of students. He was none other than the former student council president Tatebayashi Souichiro.

“I heard that Sakurasou was originally intended to be a special dormitory for the students in the arts stream to fully develop their

talents without being restricted by societal norms/'

His voice was steady, as though he was reading from a textbook.

"Putting aside the cause of this incident for now, haven't the current residents of Sakurasou become students who fit the criteria for the original purpose of Sakurasou?"

They may have been sidelined by society, but on the other hand there were people like Misaki and Mashiro staying there that had almost incomparable talents.

Sorata briefly debated with himself on whether he should feel pleased or not. Since this description made them all seem like weirdoes.

"I'm not saying that their breaking of the rules was the right thing to do. To be perfectly honest, I think they're problem students. However, after spending three years of my life in Suiko, somewhere in the deepest corners of my heart, I somehow find myself feeling incredibly jealous of these people, who refuse to go with the flow, are loyal to their own opinions alone and are strongly united with each other. I'm afraid I'm not the only one who feels the same."

As though they were in agreement with Souichiro's words, both the graduating and current students bowed their heads slightly, as though to look away from the vanity they had previously held within their hearts...

Jin observed this situation with a satisfied look on his face despite still being restrained.

"In today's society, if you do things in a different way from everyone else, you'll definitely find yourself clashing with others, and you will find it hard to fit in, that's the sad truth. So, we naturally learn how to hesitate, we misinterpret what it means to cooperate with each other, and slowly learn how to read the moods and emotions of various things.

However, I believe that sometimes we take this as an excuse to forgive ourselves, as we do not look directly at the possibilities we have, we hide in our shells before we even begin to do anything, and all we do is get better at finding reasons not to start, as well as finding excuses to slow down. The things we should be facing instead, are reasons to begin and continue working."

Everyone present swallowed briefly and listened to Souichiro speak.

"It's because of this that, if I could, I would really like to tell the myself of the past who had been perpetually hiding in his shell of cowardice, to proudly face graduation...and to stop hesitating."

Souichiro exhaled slowly.

"The people who taught this were not my teachers, but instead the residents of Sakurasou. My only regret throughout my three years of high school is not having experienced such great school days as they have."

When he finally stopped speaking, the hall once again fell into silence for the umpteenth time.

After about ten seconds, the emcee for the occasion, Chihiro grabbed a microphone and said:

"Principal, can we use this opportunity to pass a resolution?"

"What do you mean?"

"The entire student body is gathered here right now, so we can let them vote on whether the order to demolish Sakurasou should be revoked or not."

The dean then whispered something to the principal.

The principal then appeared to consider something briefly, then nodded. He must have decided that that was the only way to resolve the situation without further hassle.

“Well then, I’ll leave it to you to settle the remainder.”

Chihiro passed the microphone to Jin who had been released from his restraints. Jin shoved the microphone to Souichiro without hesitating.

“Why me?”

Souichiro grumbled softly at Jin.

Despite this, he himself knew that there was no other way around this, and so he held the microphone up to his mouth.

“So, those who approve of the revoking of the resolution, please raise your hands.”

“That isn’t interesting in the slightest~~!”

It was then that Misaki interrupted him.

“Well, do you have an alternative?”

Misaki completely ignored the disgruntled Souichiro and dashed onto the podium. Then, she took off the cherry blossom-shaped brooch that she wore on her breast and raised it above her head.

Although she did not explain what that action meant, everyone else there understood.

Sorata picked up his own brooch that had fallen off during the commotion earlier and turned around, only to see Mashiro, Nanami, as well as Ryuunosuke standing behind him, all holding their respective cherry blossoms.

All of them had only a single thought.

"Well, those in favor..."

Souichiro's voice was drowned out before he could finish.

In the next instant, the sports hall was engulfed in crazed excitement.

This year, the cherry blossoms had begun to bloom one step earlier.

Part 4

Gentle clouds floated about lazily in the clear March skies.

"The sky's so blue today."

Jin said cheerfully.

"Yeah."

Sorata's reply was completely lifeless.

"What is it, Kouhai-kun? You're all gloomy and stuff."

"Of course I look gloomy! Why are we being forced to stand outside on the day of the freaking graduation ceremony?"

It was a never-before-seen situation.

After what happened...in order to retrieve the flower bouquets that had been thrown outside earlier, a break was called that lasted about ten minutes or so, after which the ceremony resumed once again from the thank-you speech.

However, Sorata and the others who had caused a ruckus - the residents

of Sakurasou were barred from attending the ceremony, and instead they were punished by being forced to stand in a line outside the sports hall.

"It's still better than being confined in a tight space against our wills."

Ryuunosuke was fiddling with his smartphone, working on some sort of project.

"It's pretty amazing that you're able to look at things that way."

Souichiro's solemn thank-you speech could be heard from outside the hall.

"After all that's happened, I'm sure the former student council president is having a hard time too."

Jin was clearly savoring every moment.

"Really makes people sorry for him."

On the other hand, it was true that Souichiro had helped out as well, as otherwise Misaki wouldn't have been able to speak earlier.

"Jin-senpai."

"Hmm?"

"Since when did you all begin preparing for that?"

"What do you mean, 'that'?"

"The speech of course. You know very well what I'm talking about, so don't bother asking questions like that."

Mashiro and Misaki awaited Jin's reply as well in curiosity.

"Um, about when it all started. The best case scenario would obviously have been that we succeed in our petitioning activities. But if that didn't work out, we needed a backup plan. I was kinda worried since there was a chance that it would fail, but luckily everything turned out just fine."

"Why didn't you tell us earlier?"

"My sentiments exactly."

Nanami grumbled in dissatisfaction.

"If I had told you, I'm sure Aoyama-san would object, right?"

"Of course I would. But even if I did, I'm sure you would've went along with it anyway."

That was also true.

If they had listened from the very start and not done anything, they wouldn't have started all this in the first place.

"Don't blame us like that, at least let us do something befit of our senior status before we leave."

Jin's tone was flippant, leaving them to question the extent of the truth of his words.

"However, this really was an interesting strategy."

Ryuunosuke continued to stare down at his phone's display.

"You managed to first garner the sympathy of the students, then let everyone see the teachers dealing with us in inappropriate fashion, while also creating an ultimatum where they had to cancel their decision of demolishing Sakurasou, before the final verdict was decided. Under

circumstances like those, even the students who had not signed our petition would support our cause."

"When you analyse it in that manner, the whole thing sounds like some massive Ponzi scheme."

With a little brainwashing thrown in as well.

"I think you're not wrong in the slightest."

Nanami's expression hardened.

"Because although everyone may have differences in opinions, on an occasion such as the graduation ceremony everyone would be feeling sentimental anyway right? Every time I realise that we took advantage of that, I..."

It was true, Sorata's chest felt as if it was being pierced with guilt.

"Jin-senpai, don't feel me you took all this into concentration as well?"

"Don't take me as some sort of evil mastermind. It's just that, I figured in order to defeat reason, we needed to rely on emotions. Humans are emotional creatures after all."

"We got our happy ending anyway so it's fine, isn't it, Nanamin!"

"Your so-called happy ending is us being forced to stand outside on the day of the graduation ceremony itself..."

Nanami looked as if she could no longer live with herself.

"But, this is great."

Mashiro mumbled to herself.

"It's just great. We can be together after this."

"Mm, that's the spirit."

Because Sakurasou was now safe, with the order to demolish it cancelled. They could all stay together the next year once again.

"Sakurasou will live forever~"

Misaki raised her fist into the air, after which Sorata echoed "Forever~" which was when the door to the sports hall opened.

"Could you all keep it down!"

A berating voice called out from within.

"Sorata made us get scolded."

"Kanda-san, quiet down a little."

"Why aren't any of you blaming Misaki-senpai? Isn't that a little strange?"

They all began to laugh uncontrollably. Their spontaneous laughter for some reason was funny to them as well, and they all began to laugh even harder.

"But, it's probably impossible to keep our mouths shut."

Jin smiled evilly.

"That's true."

Sorata could only agree.

Who do they think the six of us are? Don't forget that we're the residents

of the hive of problem students - residents of Sakurasou.

Just then, the door opened once again.

Sorata thought that they would be receiving yet another scolding, but it was then that Chihiro walked out, silently joining Sorata and the others.

"Sensei, is something up?"

"The principal told me to stand outside too."

"My condolences."

"You're too much. I guess from now on I'll have to let off some steam by bullying Kanda to my heart's content."

"This is exactly why you're being punished!"

At that moment, they noticed four figures approaching them slowly. As they recognized who they were, they let out a collective cry of surprise.

"Huh, what's going on?"

They were people who weren't supposed to be there at all.

"Chihiro-san told us to come, she mentioned something about our help being needed to stop Sakurasou from being demolished."

The one who answered was Kazuki who led the group. The other three seemed to be about his age as well, no, they probably were at his age, since Sorata recalled seeing them in a gaming magazine article. They were the other members of Kazuki's group who had produced a game and passed the very first "Let's Make a Game" proposal judging together along with him.

"However it seems that our assistance is no longer necessary."

In contrast to his almost cynical words, Kazuki's expression seemed abnormally joyful, as if happy that he was not needed after all.

"Fujisawa, we'll head off first."

The last guy at the back of them all who appeared rather unsociable then led the other two of the three in the direction of the school gates.

"You should head back too."

"After calling me out and all, isn't that a little too cold-hearted of you?"

It was rather cold-hearted. However, that was simply a part and parcel of Chihiro's personality.

"And here I was thinking that I could make Chihiro-san owe me one so that I can make her go out with me on a date some other day."

Misaki, Jin and Nanami reacted significantly to this content. Even Mashiro widened her eyes in interest.

"You're as useless as always. Even if you don't have a good reason, as long as I get free booze to drink, you're on."

Chihiro retorted, looking to the side and away from him.

"Well then, I'll make sure to contact you once I stop by the bank to withdraw some funds."

Kazuki smiled jokingly then left.

Sorata and the others turned to look at Chihiro. Chihiro pretended not to notice.

"It looks like even Chihiro's springtime has come."

Despite being teased by Jin, Chihiro didn't reply.

The graduation ceremony appeared to be going smoothly, and the gifting of souvenirs seemed to have ended as well.

After a while, the sounds of an orchestral accompaniment could be heard by them from outside the hall.

It was time for the signing of the graduation song.

Sorata looked into the hall through the gap between the half closed door, only to see Saori elegantly playing a tune on her violin.

Every year's graduation song would be decided by a vote among the third-year student. This time the song chosen was a popular pop song which had been declared the official Olympic theme song by the NHK.

After the overture ended, the energetic vocals section began.

It was too poor to be called a choral performance, with the intonation being horribly inaccurate as well, but it was filled with the individual feelings of all the students, and it held an astounding power.

The empathy-inducing lyrics of the song pierced Sorata's chest. The song made him recall the himself of yesterday, which made him feel as if he was going to suffocate. It awakened memories of the past...memories of the perilous road they had traveled.

The first to begin singing was Misaki. She looked up to the heavens, letting out her voice cheerily.

And then, after a bar or so, Jin overlapped her voice with his own.

Sorata, Mashiro and Nanami took a brief look at each other, before singing along with them.

Ryuunosuke smiled in puzzlement, but he tapped his foot to the beat nonetheless.

Today, Misaki and Jin will be graduating.

As this thought sprung into Sorata's mind, he felt the tears pouring out of his eyes once again. He chose not to hide his tears, and instead he began to sing as loudly as he could, as if to express something, anything through song.

As for that something, it was probably the limitless future that lay ahead of him. Today was not an end, but a new beginning.

Part 5

The re-adjourned graduation ceremony ended on a high note, albeit one hour later than expected.

After it ended, Sorata, Mashiro, Nanami, Misaki, Jin and Ryuunosuke were all brought to the principal's office, where they received a two-hour-long lecturing. About halfway through, Chihiro too was brought in to receive the same punishment.

Despite the fact that he was supposed to be listening to the sacred words of the principal, Sorata couldn't help but notice that he kept repeating the phrase "You all are really too much...", and so he began counting the times the principal said it, and thus he ended up learning nothing.

"You all better watch out after this...Speaking of which, you two are graduating today, huh."

The principal brought the session to a close somewhat awkwardly.

Before they all left the principal's office, Mashiro went to tell the principal himself that she came to Japan because she wanted to be a manga artist. Although the principal had an expression of complete disbelief on his face, after how the ceremony went earlier, he probably didn't want to continue the subject. After all that had happened, he should have been able to realise that Mashiro was completely serious.

The principal promised Mashiro that he would respect her decisions, and that he would explain the matter to the board.

By the time Sorata and the others left the principal's office, it was already about two in the afternoon.

"Ah~ I'm pooped. Today was nothing but trouble."

Jin strolled slowly down the path to the school gates while stretching.

"And whose fault is that..."

Their ragtag group of six students and one teacher continued to move forward. Jin and Misaki were holding onto the tubes containing their respective graduation certificates, and Misaki was swinging it around like a baton.

"I never thought that I'd be scolded on such an occasion."

Sorata sighed and said.

To Jin and Misaki, this was their last day of school here.

They walked through the school gates, and they stopped naturally in

their tracks, turning to look at the school buildings.

"Am I supposed to say something along the lines of 'Thank you for your three years of care?'"

Although Jin said it as if it was a joke, there were hints of loneliness in his eyes.

"Thank you for your care~"

Misaki said right after. She was on the other hand unbelievably cheerful.

Although nobody explicitly requested for them to continue moving, they once again began to walk away from the school.

Sorata and Jin were at the very end of the group, with Ryuunosuke in front of him, even further ahead was Chihiro, while Misaki walked in the middle with Nanami and Mashiro on either sides of her at the front of the group.

Nanami had been snivelling with her head facing downwards since they left the school compound.

"Nanamin is a crybaby!"

"I'm not crying."

Nope, that wasn't fooling anyone.

"That wasn't convincing in the slightest..."

Sorata quipped quietly, to which Nanami turned and glared at him

sharply in response.

"You're crying."

Although they could have just dropped the subject right then and there, Mashiro insisted on applying salt to the wound.

"I said I'm not crying!"

"Then what's that stuff coming out from your eyes?"

It was Chihiro's turn to jab at her.

"That's..."

Nanami was at a loss for words.

"It must be saliva then."

Mashiro said.

"Yeah!"

Nanami began to deprecate herself in a peculiar manner.

"What a dirty woman."

Ryuunosuke mumbled to himself.

"It's all Kamiigusa-senpai's fault...that was just plain despicable..."

Nanami then began to complain tearfully. She was probably referring to

the speech earlier.

"Go comfort her already, Sorata."

Jin gave Sorata a push from behind, and so he walked forward.

"Kouhai-kun, high five!"

Although he himself had absolutely no idea what was going on, after he and Misaki exchanged a high five, the both of them swapped positions. This resulted in Sorata being the one walking between Nanami and Mashiro instead, while Misaki retreated to Jin's side and hugged his arm.

Having good relationships really is a good thing.

"I really wasn't crying."

Nanami glared at him, her eyes red.

"I know."

"Really?"

"Really."

"That's a relief..."

She pursed her lips like a duck's beak.

Just as they were passing by the local playground, Misaki suddenly began playing rock-paper-scissors with the others. Before Sorata knew it, even Ryuunosuke and Chihiro had been dragged into the game, with

the loser having to carry everyone's things.

They smiled as they won, and smiled as they lost. And when Mashiro happened to lose, Sorata would be forced to become a temporary mover.

After they got bored of that they began to play hide and seek, and when they got bored of that they simply moved on to another game, and they journeyed home in this manner. It was almost as if every single thing they did was fun to them, and their laughter did not cease even once along the way.

Just like that, a journey that would have normally taken them ten minutes, today took them an hour instead.

When they arrived at Sakurasou, the day would be over. It was probably because they all secretly thought this way that they had spent such an abnormal amount of time to get home, like a bunch of idiots.

Despite this, they continued to inch closer and closer to Sakurasou, they climbed up the light slope, and returned to the familiar, old, wooden two-story apartment.

They stopped outside the front door, none of them saying a word.

"Sorata."

The first one to break the silence was Mashiro.

"What is it?"

"The photo."

"Oh."

Sorata knew what she meant in the instant that she had opened her mouth. He recalled that he had once told Mashiro that, before Misaki and Jin graduated, they would all take a photo together. Right in front of Sakurasou...

"I knew something like this would happen, so I brought my digital camera along~"

Misaki pulled out a silver digital camera from her bag.

Nobody complained.

Misaki passed the camera to Sorata, then dashed into Sakurasou.

"Senpai, aren't we taking a photo?"

He had absolutely no idea what was going on.

Misaki ignored Sorata and the others who were still in confusion, and quickly returned with seven cats in tow.

It appeared that she wanted the cats in the photo as well.

"Alright, lights, camera, action, Kouhai-kun!"

Energetic as always.

Sorata used the door as a tripod, making sure to get everyone including the cats into the picture. Then, he set the timer.

"Hurry up, Kouhai-kun!"

"I know!"

"Kouhai-kun! Over here! Over here!"

He dashed into the space right smack in the middle of them all that Misaki had saved for him.

In the instant that he bent forward slightly so as not to block anyone from sight...

"Cowabunga!"

With a mighty roar, Misaki leaped onto Sorata's back.

"Hold on a second, Kamiigusa-senpai!"

"Misaki, that's low of you."

Mashiro and Nanami who were standing on either sides of Sorata protested before he himself had the chance to.

"What are you doing this time..."

Sorata was unable to finish his sentence. Misaki who was on his back made a victory pose to the camera while shouting "Yeah~", but because she had a cat perching on her head, she ended up losing her balance completely and fell forwards, crushing Sorata.

In the midst of the cats' cries, he could faintly hear the sound of a shutter going off.

"Let me have a look here, I wanna see what kind of interesting photo we managed to take this time."

Jin hurried forward to take a peek.

Sorata was still being crushed by Misaki.

"Misaki-senpai, get off him already!"

"Why?"

"Because I'm not a horse!"

That was probably not the time to be answering questions sensibly.

"Oh, not bad."

Jin had a satisfied expression on his face as he admired the photo.

He showed it to Sorata who was still being straddled by Misaki.

Misaki stretched forward from her position on his back to take a look as well, causing him to feel a rather ticklish sensation on the back of his neck due to her breathing. Mashiro and Nanami stuck their heads out from either sides of him instead.

Just as Jin had said, the photo really was not bad. However, it didn't seem like a commemorative photo in the slightest...

The photo somehow managed to capture Sorata in the exact instant that he was about to trip and fall, with his mouth wide open and accompanied with a panicked, silly expression. Behind him, Misaki had

a smile on that seemed to stretch from ear to ear, and she was pointing a victory sign at the camera.

Mashiro was clutching onto her right arm, and she was looking at Sorata with a dissatisfied expression. No, it seemed more as if she was glaring at him in anger.

Nanami who was on the other side of him had her head lowered in mild embarrassment instead, and she had discreetly grabbed onto Sorata's arm with the tips of her fingers. That action was so cute that even those viewing the photo felt embarrassed looking at it.

Everyone's gazes shifted and focused on Nanami.

"Um, about that, it's not what you think it is."

"I didn't even say anything yet."

Jin smiled evilly.

"I-It was just that Kanda-san had got some stuff on his sleeve."

"Well, since Aoyama-san has put it that way, we'll take it as it is then."

"I-I guess that would be for the best."

Sorata quickly grasped onto the lifeline that Jin provided him, as he had no clue how to deal with the situation.

Beside them, Mashiro looked back and forth between Sorata and Nanami, and she began to mumble softly as though in deep thought.

Anyway, Sorata decided to pretend he didn't see that and began to study the other sections of the photograph instead.

"Coming to think of it, this photo...only Misaki-senpai's looking at the camera.

Jin was smirking at Sorata's predicament, while Chihiro had looked away from the camera slightly to yawn. Ryuunosuke even had the gall to pull out his tablet computer out of his bag to play with, completely ignoring the fact that there was a camera pointing at him. Of course, the cats were all over the place as well...

However, it was obvious to anyone that this had more of the Sakurasou-esque touch to it. Although it really didn't look like a commemorative photo at all, none of them requested to take another one.

"March the 8th"

The Sakurasou meeting records for today, had a photograph attached to it.

Chapter 5 – The Days Their Journey Began

Part 1

The party they held on the night of graduation day went on and on until the middle of the night. As grand an occasion as it may sound, in reality they were just eating steamboat in Sakurasou's dining hall, fighting for side dishes as they always did, enjoying the chaotic yet exhilarating moments they spent together.

Sakurasou promptly returned to normal the very next day.

Sorata, Mashiro, Nanami and Ryuunosuke still had an entire semester of school left that they had to attend.

Sorata woke Mashiro who had fallen asleep under the dining table up, helped her into her clothes, styled her hair into its usual fashion, then fed her breakfast...after finishing what had essentially become his morning chores, they headed off to school.

The only thing that differed from the norm was that --

“See you later~~!”

“Be careful along your way.”

Misaki and Jin would now see them off to school.

Misaki had essentially undergone a sort of complete resurrection, as she could now spend her time on producing anime, time that had been previously taken up by petitioning activities. She seemed to be producing those at alarmingly high rates, inevitably leading the others to question when exactly she ever slept.

Jin had begun to clear out his room. Before heading off to Osaka, he had a lot of spare time which, however, was pretty much completely filled up as he had to search for houses there, get his student identification settled, contact his family, et cetera, et cetera.

Despite this, Jin and Misaki always seemed to end up discussing what they would be doing in the future whenever the both of them were free. Jin would be studying off in Osaka, while Misaki would be taking video production courses over at Suimei University of the Arts. The two now had a distance that would take two hours on the Shinkansen to cover between them.

However, their opinions always seemed to be parallel to each other, causing Sorata to think that the both of them would never make any progress.

“Say, Misaki. I believe I’ve told you that I want to concentrate on writing scripts for the next four years, haven’t I?”

“Yeah, so why don’t we compromise and stay over at Nagoya together?”

“And take the Shinkansen to school everyday? That does seem rather badass.”

“Exactly!”

Even Jin could only shake her head at Misaki’s antics. The two of them simply differed too much in their ways of thinking, and they had similar conversations almost every day.

But, since it was their problem and theirs alone, Sorata could only stand by silently.

A week later, since the semestral exams were approaching, Sorata and the others could no longer spend their time relaxedly.

But, even that was fine.

Misaki and Jin would be leaving Sakurasou after they graduated.

If Sorata were to do so much as attempt to say anything, countless thoughts and emotions would definitely spill and overflow out of him.

No time in the world would be enough for him to finish, and besides, everything they should have said to each other had all been said back at the graduation ceremony. Thus, everything was fine.

They would spend their remaining days together as they always had, as there would definitely be some form of meaning behind it.

The very reason why Sakurasou was in such a calm and stable atmosphere was probably because all of them felt the same way.

After the semestral exams, Sorata began to slowly accept the results of the judging of his proposal.

On the final night of the exams, a Friday, Kazuki had specially taken time out of his schedule to explain to Sorata in detail the atmosphere at the judging, the responses of all those involved, as well as the questions that were asked and the various new ideas that were raised.

Sorata fell into a state of nearly comatose shock for almost an entire week after he heard what Kazuki had to say.

To be precise, he felt more uncertain as to what he should do next.

According to Kazuki, the reception of his proposal itself wasn't half bad.

Also according to him, the main reason why he had failed was that there was another rhythm-game themed proposal that was presented on that same day. The sales for that other project were much higher than his, and the approval ratings for it were higher as well.

Compared to this, it would've been much easier to tell him which were the areas that he had not put enough work into.

He had completely no idea what he was supposed to be improving upon, and equally no idea what he should do the next time something like this came about. His current predicament was completely unlike any other he had faced in his previous experiences.

During their discussion, Kazuki had not actually provided Sorata with any clear advice.

Kazuki would definitely know what he should do next, the solution to this problem. However, Sorata had no intention of asking him for it.

That was because deep down within himself he knew that he needed to get on his own two feet by himself, and find the way to keep moving forward. So, even if it would be a slow and tedious process, Sorata had already decided that he would slowly allow his current wounds to heal, and at the same time he had also made mental preparations for starting all over again.

“Fujisawa-san, thank you for taking care of me all this time. I’ve really learned a lot from you.”

Sorata said this to him as they parted ways.

“Good luck.”

Kazuki said and smiled, his expression appearing as if he was reminiscing about something.

It was only when they had gotten their results back that Sorata began to think like a human once again.

Day by day, slowly but surely, Sorata was beginning to understand the unknown enemy that he had no idea how to face.

The person who had given him the opportunity to do so was Mashiro.

On the way back to Sakurasou after school, Sorata had stopped by the bookstore in front of the train station in order to pick up a gaming magazine, and he had spotted the shoujo manga magazine that serialized Mashiro’s manga. The female characters Mashiro had drawn were displayed across its cover, meaning that Mashiro’s manga had gotten the spotlight for this issue once again.

There were no lines of dialogue written on the hand-drawn and colored pages at all, but yet the awkward atmosphere due to the couple arguing with each other was somehow still incredibly evident. Mashiro had made significant improvements in drawing facial expressions compared to when she had first arrived at Sakurasou.

However, she had never taken pride in this, and neither had she ever shown off a single time.

Even when her publisher sent her samples of the magazine, she would just skim through it briefly and immediately return to her drafts for the manga to be published the next month, as though nothing had ever happened.

The sight of Mashiro drawing her manga with utmost concentration had taught Sorata many things.

It was true that Mashiro had had to compete with many others to acquire the rights for her manga to be serialized monthly. She had spent many days working until she fell asleep at her desk, it was this undying effort that allowed her to clinch the prized spot on the cover of the magazine month after month. Even though she had already won, she continued to strive forward. Mashiro continued to overcome challenges, achieving victories wherever she went.

The enemy existed both within himself and aside from himself. The rounds of judging Sorata had went through were vicious competitions for limited positions, like vicious games of musical chairs.

Before he had passed the first round and successfully completed a report, the battle raged on only within himself. After painstakingly winning the first battle, he had finally managed to open the first door in his way. He had naively wished that the path toward his future would open up right then and there. However, what waited for Sorata, who still held his victorious pride within his heart, was an unbelievably wide, expansive world; so vast that he could not see where it ended.

The place he had arrived at as he opened the first door was the door that led to a world of competition.

Now, he had to compete with all the games in the world. All the games produced from then on would now be standing in Sorata's way. Even games produced by Kazuki would be his opponents, and he had to compete with them.

Sorata's legs almost caved underneath him as he realized this.

But, if he were to stop moving forward due to something like that, he would never be able to reach his goal, he would never be able to get to where Mashiro was currently standing.

No matter how good one is at something, there will always be someone better.

He knew that it wouldn't just end with him against the whole wide world. Next time, they would all be competing on different dimensions, but once again returning to battling themselves. Just like Mashiro.

The conflict would probably never end. No, it might be a conflict that would end whenever he felt like it. Once he feels satisfied with himself, it would mean that he reached the finish line. But as long as he does not, he would essentially be traveling upon an endless road. He would have to pave his own way, to find his own direction, to seek his own purpose. Even if the light were to desert him, he wouldn't mind slicing open the darkness to create it himself...

Although the details were somewhat muddled, Sorata felt as if he had already understood. Even though Mashiro, who he could never catch even a slight glimpse of, was still outside his field of vision, he had a rough idea of how many doors he had to open, the distance he had to travel before he reached her.

If he had passed the judging, he might not have realized these things. It was exactly because his project had not been approved that he was able to slow down and survey his surroundings, to reevaluate himself. That had given him the opportunity to get to where he was today.

Although the other half of the reason was his own stubbornness, his unwillingness to admit defeat, he was alright with it as he had at least realized all these things.

The muscles in his cheeks slowly relaxed.

“Sorata, you seem happy.”

“No I’m not.”

“You’re smiling.”

“Nonsense...”

Sorata felt his cheeks to confirm this, only to realize that the muscles in his cheeks had loosened after all.

“It’s disgusting.”

“Even if you really do think so, you should at least keep that to yourself!”

“That’s impossible.”

“I’m sure you can find a way to do it!”

“I can’t hold back these feelings any longer.”

“I was hoping to hear those words under more different circumstances, thank you very much!”

Sorata was now able to have conversations like these with Mashiro on the way to school.

The reason why he was able to be so calm was probably because of the person who had suffered much more than him, the person who was currently struggling through life even more than him, Nanami.

When they had begun their petitioning activities, her shift at her part-time job had already been reduced to three days a week, and this slightly more relaxed schedule continued even after the graduation ceremony.

The lessons that she had used to have every weekend were now over as well, leaving her with lots of spare time.

Yesterday was a Saturday, and when Sorata had gone out to the balcony to hang out his laundry on that day, he found Nanami sitting there, blankly staring up into the sky. Today, when he had went to the dining room to get some drinks, he spotted her staring at the clock.

"The weekends sure pass by slowly."

She had even mumbled something like that.

Sorata called out to her:

"Aoyama?"

"What is it?"

"Nothing...it's just that you seemed really bored."

"Well, I guess I just don't know what to do with all this spare time I suddenly got."

Nanami said somewhat embarrassedly.

But still, everything was alright. In her current state, what Nanami needed was lots of rest...

“Since you have the time, wanna go out and hang out or something?”

Since then, Nanami had began to go out with her classmates to sing karaoke or shopping, as well as other activities, so that may have been the reason.

However, she would always have this exhausted expression on her face whenever she returned to Sakurasou.

“Were you not having fun?”

“It’s not that, it’s just...”

“It’s just what?”

“I just feel guilty whenever I go out to have fun...or should I say I can’t keep calm.”

Nanami added briefly: “I guess it’s just my personality”, then went back to her usual routine of lazing around in the dining room.

Since the day after the graduation ceremony, a painting was displayed on one of the walls.

It was Sakurasou as Mashiro had drawn it.

Only some parts were different from its original look.

Mashiro’s figure was now crouching next to Sorata who was playing with his cats. Her hand was stretched out in the white cat, Hikari’s direction, and she was gently stroking its back.

However, in reality if Mashiro were to try that, the cats would run away immediately..

She had challenged Misaki to a game to see who could feed the most cats a few days back, but all of the cats refused to eat the treats Mashiro held, all eight of them choosing to flock to Misaki instead.

“What did you do the cats?”

“Sorata, you didn’t train them properly.”

“Nope, the problem’s definitely on you somewhere. It must be because they instinctively sensed some form of threat.”

“Instincts are powerful things.”

Mashiro looked jealously down at Misaki who was playing with the cats.

She then turned to look over at the photo they had taken during the day of the graduation ceremony.

“Do you like this photo?”

“I don’t know.”

If she didn’t, then why would she be looking at it so intently? Sorata had seen Mashiro looking at that photo almost every day. She would be biting her lips, thinking of something. Either that, or he was simply thinking too much...

“Get back to me when you find out then.”

Just like that, time passed them by without them realizing, and soon the third school term was over.

As the term ended, spring vacation began. The day of Jin's departure slowly began to approach them as well.

Part 2

March the 28th, a Monday. The skies were clear in all directions.

After multiple persuasions by Misaki who had already revved up the car's engine, Sorata went off to room 103 to get Jin.

"Jin-senpai, it's about time for you to get going."

Jin stood by the window with his back facing the door in his room that now contained nothing but a mattress and a desk.

"Jin-senpai?"

"I heard you."

Jin turned around and surveyed the room. They had already gotten some movers to move all his luggages onto the car this morning. Even a room small enough to only be able to fit six tatami mats now seemed incredibly wide when everything had been moved out of it.

"It just feels really bizarre."

Jin said, almost to himself.

"I had thought this was my room, but now that it's this empty, I suddenly can't feel any form of attachment towards it."

"Considering it's you we're talking about here, it must be because you're always spending the night outside."

“How dare you mention such things right on the day your senior’s about to leave.”

“I was just telling the truth.”

Sorata and Jin were both smiling. They would never have conversations like this again, which filled them both with sadness. However, despite the emotions the both of them were feeling, they could no longer express them through their words nor actions.

“Well then, let’s go.”

Picking up the backpack that he had left by his room door, Jin briskly walked towards the front door.

He put on his shoes and tied his shoelaces. As he walked outside, he turned to look at Sakurasou only once.

The sakura flowers coincidentally happened to be in bloom, as though to wish Jin luck on his journey.

“...”

Jin slowly took in all of Sakurasou within his vision, not saying a word.

He was smiling, although just a little bit.

What was he thinking of?

Although Sorata wanted to ask him that question, he knew that Jin would definitely beat around the bush and refuse to tell him anything. Which was why he decided to keep his mouth shut.

Some things are better kept to yourself.

Also, within another year, Sorata would understand as well. He resolved to wait until then.

Misaki sat in the driver's seat of the car that was stopped outside Sakurasou, with Jin riding shotgun and Sorata sitting in the passenger's seat right behind him. Beside him was Ryuunosuke who had been forcefully dragged along with them, while the third row of passengers consisted of Mashiro and Nanami.

All of them would be sending Jin off to the train station. Sadly, Chihiro was unable to follow them along due to some work responsibilities.

"Well, just go off and do the best you can there. Also, you can come back and visit any time you feel like it."

Chihiro had said these words to Jin as she departed, looking every part the annoyed teacher.

"If you invite me back to attend your wedding ceremony, I'll definitely rush here immediately."

Jin refused to back down.

Throughout the ride to the station, Jin suddenly became rather talkative. He talked about Sakurasou, about the former student council president, about Hauhou who was currently on the way to Austria...even after he had talked about almost everything under the sun, he continued to talk about his impressions and memories of everything that they passed by along the ride.

Misaki on the other hand barely said a word, presumably because she had to concentrate on her driving.

When they reached the station, Misaki parked the car at the station's carpark, and they all got down to see Jin off at the station balcony.

"I remember telling you all to just accompany me to the ticketing counter."

Everyone ignored Jin's words, of course.

Misaki silently passed the lunchbox she had made personally earlier to Jin.

"Thanks."

"Yeah..."

An announcement informed them that the train heading to Osaka would be entering the station soon.

True enough, a train soon entered the station coming from the direction of Tokyo.

The train decelerated slowly, and stopped neatly inside the station.

The hatches to prevent passengers from accidentally falling down onto the tracks activated, and soon after the train doors opened as well. Not a single person got down from train car number seven, while those lining up promptly filed into it.

"I have to go now."

Jin happened to be at the end of this queue, and he climbed the stairs heading into the train.

Once he had reached the top, he turned around.

Misaki appeared as if she wanted to say something, but she stayed silent the whole time instead.

"Really now, what kind of expression is that supposed to be?"

Jin climbed back down to the balcony.

He headed straight for Misaki.

“Jin.”

Misaki looked up, surprised.

“I still can’t accept being so far apart from you! I just feel so uneasy whenever you’re not around!”

“Jeez, am I really that untrustworthy?”

“That’s not what I meant. I just want something more definite.”

Misaki clutched tightly onto the ring she wore on the ring finger of her left hand as though in prayer.

Jin bent over and kissed Misaki on the forehead.

Sorata and Nanami had their mouths wide open with surprise at this sudden development, with Mashiro watching as well.

Even so, the uneasiness on Misaki’s face did not fade.

“If even this isn’t enough for you, I’ll leave this in your care for now.”

Jin pulled out a cute-looking letter.

“This is...”

Sorata recognized the letter in Jin’s hand. It was the love letter that Misaki had once placed in Jin’s shoe locker.

If its contents had not been tampered with, that would mean their marriage certificate was still inside.

“Let’s submit this after I come back.”

“Jin!”

Misaki hugged Jin tightly.

It was then that the bells indicating the train’s departure began to ring.

Misaki let go of Jin only after a long while, slowly taking in his body heat.

Jin hopped into one of the train cars at the very last instant before the train departed.

The safety hatches closed, and so did the train doors.

The streamlined train immediately began moving along its way. Sorata and the others waved while watching it leave, until they could no longer see it any more.

Just like that, Jin left Sakurasou.

Part 3

The school semester was about to end.

March the 31st.

The times slowly shifted, and the seasons went along with them. To Sorata, it would be the third spring he spent in Suiko.

However, another important person was about to leave as well.

On this day, Misaki would finally be leaving Sakurasou.

The sakura flowers were in bloom, and their scattered petals elegantly danced about along with the wind.

Under the sakura trees, Sorata pushed the last of Misaki's luggages into the back of the van with a moving company's logo emblazoned on the side of it.

One of the movers shut the back doors of the trailer, then indicated to Misaki that all preparations were now complete.

It was time for them to say goodbye.

Misaki who was instructing the movers how to arrange her luggages ran off towards Sorata and the others who were watching from afar, near the front gates of Sakurasou. She stopped right in front of them and smiled.

"Chihiro, thanks for taking care of me these past three years."

Misaki bowed in gratitude.

"Damn right you should be. I won't ever have another student who's as messy as you, I can guarantee that."

"Mashiron, Nanamin, you both take care too."

"Misaki..."

Mashiro hugged Misaki tightly.

"Kamiigusa-senpai..."

Nanami's eyes were red as well.

“Don’t cry, Nanamin. I’ll be studying over in Suimei University of the Arts after all, so we’ll definitely be seeing each other soon enough.”

“T-That’s true, but...”

It was true that they could see each other pretty much whenever they felt like it. However, on the other hand, if they didn’t feel like seeing each other from then on, they then wouldn’t be able to see each other again. Although they knew that they were all moving forward, they still felt pangs of loneliness within their hearts, and they felt their eyes moisten faintly with tears. Even though the day had finally come, none of them were able to imagine what Sakurasou would be like without Misaki’s voice.

“Dragon, be sure to go to school!”

“I’ll be attending about two-thirds of the lessons.”

Ryuunosuke, tact as always.

“Kouhai-kun!”

Misaki smiled in her signature fashion over at Sorata who was still searching for the words to say.

“I’ll be leaving Sakurasou to you!”

Sorata suddenly felt that Misaki seemed exceptionally mature all of a sudden, as she had the appearance of someone about to embark on a journey. Hence, he absolutely could not let her worry.

“Right, I won’t let you down.”

Misaki gently patted Mashiro on the back, and Mashiro finally let go of her.

“So, I’ll be seeing you!”

“Yep.”

Misaki got into the shotgun seat of the van.

The engine fired up.

Its massive wheels began turning, as though they were clamping onto the surface of the tarred road itself.

Misaki stuck her head out of the window and waved at them.

Sorata and the others waved back.

Misaki slowly went off into the distance.

A strong wind blew, causing numerous sakura flowers to fall.

“Akasaka.”

“What?”

“Is it possible for a person to make games alone?”

“...”

Ryuunosuke glanced at Sorata out of the corner of his eyes, as though to test his sincerity.

“Every time I look at Misaki-senpai I think to myself that she’s the type to do whatever she wants on a whim, so if it’s just producing games, I should be able to get to work immediately and by myself, right? I think the best way to deal with creative urges like this is to give your ideas a go and attempt to make them a reality.”

During the graduation ceremony, the former student council president Souichiro had said that making excuses to avoid doing something or hesitating to do something weren't things that the residents of Sakurasou would do.

"Also, just making proposals and drafts like I'm doing now can't actually be considered as producing games right?"

Generating actual products were the best after all. Sorata wanted to make something that could be felt with his own hands.

"With your current knowledge of programming, the things you can do are very limited. However, what you said isn't impossible. There are free game-making engines out there, after all."

Ryuunosuke replied in his usual fashion.

"I see. That's all I need to know for now."

He just needed to start with things that he knew how to do. As for the things he didn't, he would just have to learn.

Then, he would have to think about who to get to test his games. No matter the reviews, be them positive or negative or that the game was downright crappy, he would be able to learn from them in order to compete against the big, wide world the next time. That was the answer Sorata had found for himself during his third spring in Sakurasou, and it was also his new goal.

"Hey, Kanda-san."

"Hmm?"

Nanami said, eyes still focused on Misaki's van.

"I feel like starting all over again."

Sorata looked over at Nanami in surprise. Her expression was filled with grim determination.

"It just feels so bizarre. I cried so hard back then, and I thought that I would never be able to try ever again...I guess I just got bored of being depressed for this past month. Now, my determination to reach my goal is even stronger than before."

"I see."

"Yeah."

"Well then, all the best to you."

"Mm."

Nanami nodded her head slowly. Her mood grew increasingly cheerful, just like the clear blue sky during the spring.

Suddenly, a certain person butted in out of the blue. It was Chihiro.

"So, I suggest you use this spring break to go back to Osaka for a while. To properly convince your parents."

Nanami's expression tensed slightly.

"Although I know you had planned to stumble through these two years by yourself, but you should at least know that this dream of yours can't be achieved with all these problems at hand, right?"

"..."

"If you think that being an adult means relying on yourself and nobody else to think and make decisions, you couldn't be more wrong. That just means you can't slow down to consider the opinions of others, which

makes you nothing more than a little brat. You've noticed yourself, haven't you? The decision you made two years ago was just an attempt to run away."

Nanami nodded without a word.

She wiped off the tears that had begun to trickle out of her eyes, and declared loudly to Chihiro:

"I'm going back to Osaka for a while to talk to my parents, then I'm coming back."

Another new beginning. Sorata and Nanami's journeys were only truly beginning now.

"Whether you're going to stay here or leave...just think about it after you talk it through with your parents. I'm fine with you staying here, since there are empty rooms around anyway."

Having said everything she had to say, Chihiro turned and walked back into Sakurasou.

Sorata had forgotten about everything.

Nanami had no reason to stay in Sakurasou any longer. Although it would seem that she could continue studying in Suiko, if she were to convince her father, she wouldn't have to worry about her finances any longer. She wouldn't need to rely on part-time jobs and the like to support herself any more. If that were the truth, she might even be able to return to the normal dormitories.

Nanami met Sorata's gaze, having realized that he was looking at her.

They both knew that they were thinking about what to say to each other.

"How would you feel if I were to leave this place?"

Nanami looked away.

“T-That...I think that’s what you should be thinking about.”

“Well, I know that but...I was just trying to ask whether you would miss me or something...”

“W-Well, of course...if you really want me to say it, I guess I do want you to stay.”

Sorata could no longer look directly at Nanami, and so he looked away as well. As he did so, his gaze coincidentally met Mashiro’s, who was standing beside him the whole time.

She stared back at him with those clear eyes of hers.

“W-What is it?”

“Sorata, I think I finally know now.”

Mashiro spoke solemnly, an earnest expression on her face.

“That’s surprising. So, what is it that you know?”

“It’s very important.”

“No, i wasn’t asking how important that thing is...”

Sorata suddenly recalled something.

“Ah - don’t tell me you’re referring to that photo we took after the graduation ceremony?”

He remembered he had told Mashiro to tell him once she knew what was going on.s

“Yes.”

Mashiro replied, and looked at both Sorata and Nanami.

“Me?”

Nanami tilted her head in confusion.

“...”

Mashiro fell silent, and an inexplicable sense of nervousness came over them.

What exactly did she know? What was she trying to say? Sorata’s heart began to beat faster and faster.

Then, Mashiro finally spoke.

“Nanami’s just like me.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Nanami and Sorata expressed their surprise at once. How were they alike at all?

“I’m just like Nanami.”

“You’re just reversing the order of the names!”

“That’s because Nanami has feelings for Sora-”

Mashiro cut to the chase.

“Wait, Mashiro! Don’t say any more!”

She was interrupted by Nanami before she could finish her sentence.

“Oi, Kanda.”

Ryuunosuke butted in as well. Looking closely, Sorata noticed that Nanami had both her hands over Mashiro’s mouth. Mashiro appeared as if she was saying something, but her voice could no longer be heard.

“Y-You will end this topic of conversation right here! Understand? Not another word!”

Nanami said with a scary-looking expression on her face. Sorata decided to let the matter rest and turned to Ryuunosuke instead.

“Akasaka, what’s the matter now?”

“That.”

Ryuunosuke pointed into the distance.

Sorata turned around once again only to see that Misaki’s van had parked once again ahead of them.

“Did she forget something?”

Misaki got down from the shotgun seat just as Sorata finished his sentence. The fit-looking mover who was in the driver’s seat got down as well, and he deftly began transferring Misaki’s luggage into the new house that had just been built beside Sakurasou.

“Huh?”

What was going on?

Sorata had absolutely no idea.

Anyway, he decided to head over there to find out.

He looked up at the posh-looking bungalow that had been built beside Sakurasou. It seemed even larger than his house over at Fukuoka.

"I'm not exactly willing to entertain the possibility, but, this..."

"I think what you're thinking might be true."

Nanami groaned in exasperation as she realized the only thing this whole situation could mean. Sorata reached the same conclusion as well.

"So this is where she moved to!?"

Sorata yelled, while Misaki casually strolled out of the house in question.

"My name is Mitaka Misaki, and I'll be your new neighbour starting today! I hope we get along, Kouhai-kun! Here, take this as a moving-in gift!"

Sorata blankly took the container Misaki was holding from her.

"Wait, wha...no, what's up with this house!?"

"I built it."

"I figured as much!"

"There's even a room in the basement where I can do some sound recording, synchronize audio and video files, as well as a workstation where I can edit my videos! What do you think!"

"Oh, it does sound pretty amazing."

The scale of the whole thing was just too big, too big for him to even consider. How many millions of yen had she spent on this thing? If she had spent in the billions, that would be another matter entirely...

“Never mind that for now, Kanda-san...”

Nanami was staring at the house’s gates as she called out to him. The word “Mitaka” was written on a small sign at the side. Sorata glanced at it as well, as it did seem somewhat eye-catching. Also, Misaki had introduced herself with the surname “Mitaka” and not “Kamiigusa” earlier...

He suddenly recalled the love letter Jin had passed to Misaki earlier at the train station.

Their marriage certificate was inside.

Jin had told Misaki to wait for him to come back before submitting it. That definitely meant waiting for four years until he came back from Osaka, but...

“Misaki-senpai, what did you do with that love letter from earlier?”

“Oh, I sent it off, since it wouldn’t do if I were to lose it or something.”

“Sent it off to where!?”

Although he pretty much knew where it had ended up, he couldn’t stop himself for asking.

“The city hall, of course~~!”

Misaki replied blankly.

“Did you tell Jin-senpai?”

"I told him over the phone just now."

"What did he say?"

"He was so happy that he couldn't even find the words to say~~"

Sorata had a sneaking suspicion that the more likely possibility was that he was too shocked to say anything.

"Anyway, more importantly! Starting from today, I'm a housewife and a university student! Aren't you excited, Kouhai-kun! Don't hold yourself back!"

"Um, Misaki-senpai."

"What?"

"Never mind, congratulations, I guess."

Misaki cried out cheerily:

"Yeah~~ I'm feeling hungry, so~~ let's all go out and eat together!"

Misaki raised her fists high into the sky. It would seem that they could now eat together every single day from now on.

Beside Sorata, Nanami smiled thinly. Mashiro hugged Misaki once again, presumably overjoyed at this turn of events. Ryuunosuke sighed, clearly running thin on patience.

Sorata smiled as well and looked up at the sky.

His disposition grew clearer, as though all the unnecessary impurities within his heart had been cleansed. When he returned to his senses, there was only a single sensation remaining within his heart. It was a

sensation that made him feel uncertain and restless, and he began to think about what Mashiro had planned to say earlier.

“Is something wrong?”

Mashiro asked as their eyes met once again.

“No, it’s nothing.”

However, Sorata didn’t plan to bring up that topic again. He could guess what was going on even without asking. That was because he had felt somewhat nostalgic when Mashiro had brought up the topic of Nanami.

Sorata had known what that feeling was since long ago.

Impossibly, he had a prediction as well. He had reached his limit anyway, despite sugarcoating his lies as much as he possibly could. In the near future, he saw himself facing up to the emotions that he had been hiding all this time...

The wind scattered the sakura petals, causing them to scatter about.

The spring of his third year was on its way, along with all the other seasons of a new year. To Sorata, it would be his final year in high school, be it a happy or a sad one.

He looked up at the blue sky above him, and he realized that it was completely blank. What would he draw on this vast piece of canvas? As of this very moment, he could probably draw anything.

Because, no matter what future may await him, it would definitely be closely tied to this place. To Sakurasou.